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# AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE

BEING SOME INCIDENTS IN THE CAREER OF CAPTAIN AND  
BREVET-MAJOR THE HON. ROLLO DENNISTOUN, V.C., M.C.,  
DURING HIS OFFICE AS MILITARY SECRETARY TO HIS  
EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR OF MAHDIPUR

BY

ARDERN BEAMAN,

AUTHOR OF

"TRAVELS WITHOUT BAEDEKER," "THE SQUADROON"

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TO  
THAT DOMINION  
WHICH  
SO LONG AS VALOUR AND HUMANITY  
REMAIN  
THE CHARACTERISTIC QUALITIES OF OUR RACE  
WILL NEVER BE  
“ THE LOST DOMINION ”  
I DEDICATE  
THESE SYNTHETIC EPISODES

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# AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE

## THE DEATH FIRES

WHEN Rollie Dennistoun was appointed Military Secretary to the Governor of Mahdipur, every frontier mess grinned broadly, and betted among themselves as to exactly how many days it would be before Rollie chucked that gilded cage business and returned to the life of a man.

And in the evenings, if you found favour in their sight, those brown-skinned men with the little medals clinking on their mess kits would point to the wicked Frontier Hills, or to away back behind cantonments where the native city seethed and festered in every imaginable vice and crime, and, chuckling, would tell you stories of his doings in one or the other—doings that made of old Haji Baba a dreary and deflated back number.

But although they worshipped, they did not quite understand him—that long, strong brown man, so slight looking because of his perfect proportions, and with features as delicate as a girl's, who unaccountably preferred his own quarters and the works of Master William Shakespeare to the gup and gossip of the bar.

It was when Rollie sat in a certain Simla office hung around with great maps of Central Asia—all dotted over with cryptic little flags—telling a group of elderly keen-eyed men in his slow, quiet voice some startling things about the Chaknawar Mulla's mysterious visitor from Stamboul, that one of the Great Ones had had a brain wave.

He, this Great One, a Member of Council, I think he was, was practised in weighing up the worth of a man; and here in Rollie Dennistoun, whose name was a by-word in every place where men gather for sport—even from the polo grounds of Hurlingham to the tiger haunted jungles of the Terai, and back again via Lord's to the



centre court at Wimbledon—he saw a man who had not only the daring to execute a parlously perilous Secret Service job, but—rare combination—the brain to reap fully, understanding what was at the back and beyond.

Such a man was needed in the Province of Mahdipur—about which queer rumours were afoot; and late that night over the Great One's port, in the big new bungalow that overlooks Annandale, Rollie—the Rollie Dennistoun—consented to don the aiguillettes, and carry Her Excellency's parasol, and arrange dinner parties in rigid order of precedence, and dance with partnerless ducklings, and write out invitation cards, because there were things in Mahdipur that had to be done—dark, secret things of which his astonished world would never know.

Then the rumour started. How it started, I don't know, but once a rumour does start in India, it runs like wild-fire from mess to mess and club, throughout the length and breadth of the land, snowballing as it goes. And at sunset time, while the band hammered out stale waltzes in club compounds, and the tennis-clad damsels danced inside, men in lather-splashed polo kit or hockey shorts shook their heads solemnly in the bar over long, ice-tinkling drinks, and told each other that Rollie Dennistoun had done the unspeakable thing; that he had got a pal—young Ivor Jourdan, to wit, who everybody knew was a popular, perfectly harmless fellow—kicked out of India—because he, Rollie Dennistoun, wanted Ivor's girl.

And next Jerry Landon, a reigning demi-god whose polo handicap stood nine at Roehampton, publicly and ostentatiously cut him in the Chattar Manzil after the Army Cup; and after that the Mess President of a certain regiment that fancied itself more than most and set up to give the tone to Mahdipur, wrote formally in the name of the Colonel and the Officers requesting that Rollie would no longer consider himself an Honorary Member of their Mess. Rollie showed me the letter with his quiet smile, and when I raged blasphemously and wanted to go and tell that regiment exactly the sort of yelping jackals that they were, he just smiled again and shook his head; for Rollie, who excelled other fellows in pretty well everything, was the only man I have ever

known who did not care one brass farthing what anybody else thought about him.

And later on, when, little by little, a few of the facts leaked out, and in fullness of time Rollie married the girl, that regiment had the infernal cheek to send him a huge salver inscribed with all the officers' names in their own filthy handwriting; and when I asked him why he didn't fling it back in their faces, his big humorous grey eyes that seemed to see everything whole, and always to be faintly amused at what they saw, merely twinkled a little more than usual.

But the officers of that regiment even now do not know that on the night which gave rise to the rumour, Rollie and I went to the brink of a death that still sets me yelling with nightmares—that he and I were flung on to the pyre among the cholera corpses, down there in Gehenna, the burning *Ghât*, where the thick, fat death fires blaze and glow; and all because Rollie loved Lady Joan, the Governor's niece, and she loved another—a dud, whose honour, for her sake and that of England, Rollie tried to save.

Of what actually did happen on that terrible night, Ivor Jourdan knows too much for his peace of mind, but not all; old Muldoo knows a little, and, I suspect, guesses a good deal more; but only Rollie and I know the whole facts—for as to those others who took part in the drama, their bodies were dust before the day broke, and their souls are now, I trust, in a place considerably hotter than India.

But I am running on too fast. Rollie had just got me appointed Commandant of the Mahdipur Bodyguard, and after I had reported my arrival and we had hugged each other in spirit—for at one time and another we had been through many things together, old Rollie and I, and were mighty glad to be together again—I went forth to the long, low mud-and-mat roofed lines, just down the slope behind Government House, to take over the silky black beauties.

It was getting late when, with a head full of deficiencies and equipment, I strolled back to his quarters and found him stripped to the buff, doing surprising things under the eye of Muldoo, the conjuror—old Muldoo, eighth

wonder of the world, whom you may see at any time on the verandas of the tourist hotels from Cawnpore and Lucknow, Agra and Delhi, to Nedou's in Kashmir, making full-blown mango trees to grow out of nothing, and boys to vanish up a rope into thin air. A King of Conjurers, old Muldoo—and much more besides; but there are only four men in India who know that.

With a quickness my eye could not follow Rollie caught a striking cobra, cleanly, in mid-air, behind its spectacled hood, while Muldoo gravely nodded approval, and held it out towards me with its horrid forked tongue flickering.

"Hi! don't point that damned thing at me!" I shouted, for I can't stand snakes at any price, fanged or unfanged; and with a grin he flung it back into the basket.

"Old Muldoo here, thinks I'm the thickest pupil he ever had," he said, laughing; "don't you, you old idol?"

"Nay, he learns—he learns," said Muldoo, wagging his head at me. "Because Dennistoun Sahib saved my second son from the lame tiger, therefore show him I something of the wisdom. Among the Sahib Log there is none but he who can catch the Flying Dagger; only he who knows the Infallible Fall; he only who can slip the Thuggi's Knot. Only Dennistoun Sahib knows——"

"What an out-and-out old villain Muldoo is!" laughed Rollie. "Clear out now. *Rakhsat hai!*"

"Is there nothing better to do in these marble halls than toying with serpents and nigromancy?" I asked, when Muldoo had departed with his baskets and stock-in-trade, and a deep salaam to each of us.

Rollie grinned.

"This is an odd sort of place, Jumbo. One never knows when those parlour tricks mightn't come in handy."

I poured out a whisky and soda, and he proceeded to dress in a leisurely and immaculate fashion, telling me the while a few little things about Mahdipur that would have made old John Citizen sit up and shout for the police, when suddenly a young officer dashed in with a face as white as if he had just seen a ghost.

This was Ivor Jourdan, one of the A.D.C.'s, a very beautiful youth who was reputed to have an irresistibly

fascinating way with the maidens. He was a connection of Lady Bellingdon, the Governor's wife, and—I had already heard—there was an "understanding" between him and Lady Joan, which Her Excellency, than whom no one had a shrewder eye for the main chance, was pushing hard: for Lady Joan, as everybody knew, was the seventh biggest heiress in the peerage. As I have said, he dashed in, looking pretty well scared to death.

"I say, Rollie," he stammered, "the Q cypher has gone!"

Rollie jumped clean out of his chair.

"What!"

The wretched lad's teeth fairly chattered, and he began to stutter in a series of despairing gasps.

"His Ex. gave it to me—to lock up in the safe—just now—and I—I left it in my room for a few minutes while I—I went to—to—tell Joan something—and when I came back it—it—had—gone!"

As Ivor gulped out his disgraceful story a strange light shone in Rollie's eyes—the sort of light you see in a man's eyes at the tables when next minute a spin of the wheel may change the whole course of his life! a light which I did not then, but soon would, understand. Like a flash it passed, and the grey eyes were clear and calm again. Rollie wasted no time in futile questions or vain reproaches.

"Does His Ex. know yet?" he asked.

"N-no. I simply daren't tell him."

The miserable Ivor with a face whiter than chalk gazed haggardly at us; and at that moment the Governor himself appeared.

Henry, fifth Viscount Bellingdon, was a kindly, grey-moustached nobleman who wore a button-hole and believed unquestioningly in the straight bat, regular exercise, and the divine right of the British Empire. He gave us a genial nod as we respectfully stood up.

"Good evenin', boys! I'll be down at the squash courts in half an hour, Rollie."

"Right ho, sir, I'll be there."

Humming a little tune he made for the door, then turned again.

"Oh, by the way, Ivor, I want the Q. cypher at ten

o'clock to-morrow. Another despatch to Foreign Secretary."

It was a ghastly moment. Until that day I had never seen Ivor, but my own heart hammered in my head, and I have never felt so sorry for anyone as I did for the poor devil then, as he stood there, trying to speak, his lips moving, but no sound coming. Another second and the Governor must have noticed that something was wrong, had not Rollie's hand come down on the A.D.C.'s shoulder and his light gay laugh rang out.

"I'll see he doesn't forget, sir."

When the door closed behind him, and we breathed again, Ivor asked helplessly what he was to do. "He's bound to be told to-morrow," he faltered, "and then it's all up with me."

This was true enough. An officer who through negligence loses a cypher can, as we all knew, expect nothing but dismissal and disgrace. I felt that the situation was entirely beyond me; but Rollie lit a cigarette and smoked it half through in silence, gazing dreamily out over the palms to where the little grey apes swung and chattered about the dome of an old-age temple, while we fidgeted miserably; then at last he spoke, unconcernedly almost.

"You'll take the cypher to His Ex. at ten a.m. as ordered, Ivor."

We gaped stupidly, and he went on. "By rights Government should be notified of the loss at once, so as to change the cypher; but that would throw everything into chaos for forty-eight hours, as well as causing you a certain unpleasantness, Ivor, my lad. So, as I'd bet a case of bubbly to a small tonic water that I know where the cypher is, or very soon will be, I think we'll just get it back quite quickly and quietly, before any harm's done—and say nothing more about it."

"You know where it is," faltered Ivor.

Rollie took a long sip of his drink in that calm, slow way of his that sometimes nearly drove me dotty.

"Our esteemed friend and neighbour, the Rajah of Gulistan," he said, "would give his loveliest dancing girl for that cypher. During the last week wireless despatches have been buzzing to and fro between us and

Government and Downing Street about his boundary dispute—which, of course, he has tapped, but can't decode." Rollie paused again, then added carelessly as if in afterthought, "Old Muldoo saw da Silva in Mahdipur this afternoon."

"Da Silva? Good God!" I exclaimed.

Now the young Rajah of Gulistan was a type of potentate that cannot be decently written about. There was that case of the abducted white girl a year or so back, and what followed—and many other things as well, the mere mention of which sets whole regiments cursing aloud and clamouring to be led across the Border. And the notorious Ferdinand da Silva, who some said was a Grandee of Portugal, and others a British soldier's half-caste bastard, but to this day no one knows for certain, had, like many adventurers before him in the story of India, raised himself by craft and ferocity, but more particularly by pandering to the young Rajah's perverted lusts, to be the virtual ruler of Gulistan.

If you rolled all the deepest dyed villains of melodrama into one, and doubled it, and doubled it again, you would begin to get some sort of inkling of what he was like. His speciality was inventing ingeniously excruciating tortures, for nothing so tickled the Rajah's besotted senses as the spectacle of women in shrieking agony.

"It's pretty obvious," went on Rollie, "that our thief and Comrade Ferdy will shortly meet. That leper already has reason enough not to love me," he chuckled, "and it would give me quite a good deal of personal satisfaction to snooker the beast again."

Now Heaven knows I was sorry enough for Ivor, but this struck me as carrying altruism a bit too far.

"Look here, Rollie," I said, "suppose da Silva *does* get away with the cypher, then you'll be broke, too, for not reporting its loss."

"Quite," he said calmly.

I stared markedly at Ivor, who began to fidget and stammer awkwardly.

"I say—it's most awfully good of you, Rollie, but perhaps I ought to—to tell His Ex.——"

The poor lad's face, all white and clammy, was pitiable

to behold, and I think I was really rather glad when Rollie pushed him out of the room with a smile and told him to go and see that there were plenty of pins and powder in the ladies' cloak-room for that night's official dinner. "All the same," I said half-heartedly, "you've no right to risk your own commission on the millionth chance of saving his."

Rollie shook his head thoughtfully. "It's too late to change the cypher or to tell the police now. They'd only raise a hell of a hue and cry and put da Silva on his guard; and if Gulistan decodes those messages he's already tapped, all Central Asia will be ablaze in a week. Quite apart from young Ivor, it's worth risking one man's career to prevent that—even if that man happens to be oneself. Now my idea is—but this may alter it!"

As he spoke old Muldoo lifted the Venetian blind and came soft-footed in from the veranda. He gave me a searching glance and then spoke rapidly to Rollie for a few minutes in a dialect that I did not understand; handed him a slip of paper; and departed as silently as he had come.

Rollie stood sunk in thought for an age, then suddenly he laid his arm on my shoulder.

"Jumbo, old lad, it's going to be a pretty grim show to-night. Are you on for it? I don't ask for myself, or young Ivor, or"—his voice shook a little—"for Lady Joan—but—well, because we happen to be white men. Of course, it's no concern whatever of yours, and——"

"Don't be a damn fool," I said; "what's the plan?"

Slowly and deliberately, while I danced with impatience, he lit another cigarette.

"Muldoo has eyes and ears everywhere," he began at last; "watching da Silva like a cat; and just now he saw one of da Silva's gang loitering outside the gates, and straightway picked his pocket—pick-pocketry is one of the old rogue's accomplishments—and extracted this *billet-doux*, obviously intended for someone here." He held up the slip of paper I had seen Muldoo give him. "It is lucid and laconic and reads:—"

"Lay thy offering at the feet of Kali in the Grove at nine this night."

"So the cypher's still in Government House," I said.

" Exactly. But there would be more chance of finding the proverbial needle than it in the warren of the servants' quarters. The only way is to attend this interesting little ceremony in Kali's Grove and cop the thief delivering the goods. Whether da Silva will come alone, or, as is more likely, bring a posse of hired assassins with him, I don't know—but anyway we can't risk anyone else knowing about the loss of the cypher, and as Ivor is A.D.C.-in-waiting to-night, you and I have got to do the job alone—hullo, come in ! "

There was a sharp knock, followed by the entry of a young girl, who, in spite of a painful agitation, was amazingly pretty—all spirit and sparkle and magnetism, and, I could see, character. As I looked at her then, even in her terrible distress, I understood how it was that every subaltern in Mahdipur was off his feed, and why two captains and a major had suddenly applied for the Gold Coast. Report had not exaggerated Lady Joan's attractions. Seemingly oblivious of my presence, she went straight up to Rollie, her bosom heaving, and laid a hand on his arm.

" Ivor has told me," she said in a low, tense voice of entreaty. " Rollie, oh, Rollie, you must save him ! "

And when I saw the concentrated torture of all hell come into Rollie's eyes, I understood at last how things were; and I understood, too, that strange look I had seen there when Ivor first told us of his impending disgrace—and also, knowing Rollie a little, I understood why he was risking his career, even his life, where ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have thanked heaven, rejoicing that Fate had played so neatly into their hands.

Women were queer fish, I reflected, to think that one of the most intelligent of them should choose that foppish rotter before Rollie; but there is no accounting for the vagaries of sex. And this woman with unconscious cruelty was adding to the torture by treating Rollie as a sort of very dear elder brother. But in spite of his haunted eyes there was a gentle smile on his lips when he calmed her in a voice that was quiet and assured.

" Don't worry, Joey ! We'll get it back all right—and no one will ever know that Ivor lost it."

And feeling that I was in the presence of tragedy—



tragedy that I could see Lady Joan herself, with a woman's blindness, was totally unaware of—I stole out of the room.

That night two tall natives skirted the splashes of light that shone out from the Banqueting Hall, where the uniforms and the Paris frocks blazed and glittered, and the Governor's string band mingled with the buzz of the conversation; crept silently through the heavily palm-shaded grounds; passed the sentry's challenge at the Guard Room by the North Gate; and set out swiftly for Kali's Grove. Our make-up was the work of no mean artist; and in the folds of our waistcloths, ready to hand, we each carried a brace of guns.

Even at mid-day, when the bazaars of Mahdipur were one dense-packed roaring medley of every race and creed of Central Asia, I think we should have gone unnoticed; but at that hour, save for the slinking pariahs that scavenged the gutters, all was as still as death, and we hurried on through the *ghee* and garlic-laden air, carefully picking our way between the shrouded forms that slept on the pavement, stark as corpses.

The moon was rising over a vista of palm and minaret as we came out of the silent city and sped on, through the mud-and-wattle habitations of the "untouchables," where lean, yellow dogs barked, towards the sinister blob of shadow that was Kali's Grove.

"We'll work up to it under cover of this nulla," Rolli whispered in my ear.

As we crept stealthily as stalkers into the precincts of that terrible goddess, I could not repress a shudder. In secret places dark and dreadful rites are still practised in her name; and now, as the blood-smeared idol grinned evilly at us through the shadows and the reek of slaughtered goats came sickeningly to our nostrils, I recalled stories of mysterious disappearances and horrible propitiations that sent cold shivers down my back.

It wanted a few minutes to nine. Save for the macabre braying of a conch from a distant temple, there was no sound or movement. We crouched in the shadows waiting, waiting, our eyes glued on the graven image.

Nine o'clock at last. A white-robed figure glided like

a ghost through the grove and stooped swiftly to the idol's feet. Rollie gripped my arm.

"Now!" he whispered.

We sprang out upon it, and even as my arm was raised to strike, I saw Rollie collapse in a heap at my feet, and my own arms were pinioned from behind. As if by magic the grove had filled with dark, silent-footed figures, and eyes that shone luminous, like animals in the dark; and before my stupefied brain could grasp what had happened, I was bound hand and foot, as was also Rollie's unconscious form. Then the smooth, silky voice of da Silva sounded mockingly in my ear.

"Pray do not be anxious about Major Dennistoun. He will soon revive, and then there are one or two things I wish to tell him before you—er—leave us to-night."

Still dazed and lying bound on the earth, I could only gaze up stupidly at his tigerish face with its blazing green moons of eyes, while he chuckled again.

"I really had a higher opinion of him and his friend Muldoo than to fall so easily into my little trap; but we must discuss that later, as a kind friend is now waiting for me elsewhere with the cypher. But meanwhile, Captain Carstairs, I have arranged that you shall enjoy a unique experience."

His teeth gleamed white in a terrible sneer, and he pointed eastward to where a dull red glow lit up the sky. "In short," he purred, "you are to have the rare distinction of attending your own funeral!"

"You filthy swine!" I shouted, "release us at once and return the cypher, or, by God, you'll regret it!"

But though I spoke as boldly as I could, I knew that we were already as good as lost.

He leaped towards me with a savage snarl, his knife glinting in the moonlight; then, checking himself with an effort, he sheathed it again. "Tut, tut! that were too commonplace an end for such distinguished officers! You are reserved for higher things. For the present —,"

He broke off, and drawing back a pace, kicked me full in the face with his heavily booted foot; then, at a sign from him, gags were rammed into our mouths; fierce-eyed, grinning men lifted our helpless forms on to a

couple of charpoys, such as the natives use for biers; linen shrouds were thrown over us; and those fiends set off down the road, wailing and chanting a funeral dirge.

I suppose I must have been stunned by that brutal kick in the face, for I have little memory of the nightmare of my own funeral, beyond that da Silva occasionally pricked us through the shrouds with his knife and made coarse jests about us, all woven into the sing-song refrain of the dirge.

But when at last the procession halted, and my shroud was removed, I saw all around me clouds of thick, greasy smoke, and long, low guttering fires; and silhouetted in the flame of them, rows of stark corpses, which ever and anon rose to a sitting posture as the fire touched their spines. And then alongside, I saw a heaped-up pile of dead, awaiting their turn. We were in the part of the burning *ghat* set aside for the lowest castes, where the ritual is never elaborate, and now, during the panic of a cholera epidemic, had been entirely dispensed with.

They put the charpoys down, and I heard one of da Silva's ruffians bargaining with the attendant ghoul for a pyre. There was one, it seemed, which had gone out, and he was about to light again, which had plenty of fuel yet for two bodies more; and on to that, after much haggling, we were laid among the charred bodies already on it. Then, while the attendant held out his hand for his ill-gotten money, da Silva, quick as thought, knifed him between the shoulders; and he, too, spouting blood, was thrown on top of us.

"Dead men tell no tales!" da Silva chuckled, and having pricked Rollie with his blood-stained knife and found him still unconscious, he said to me:

"It is not lighting-up time yet, because, as I said before, there are one or two things I want to say to Major Dennistoun—and also, there is still one more to join you. In the meantime you will be able to meditate on the problems of eternity—and the feelings of the Christian martyrs! I am leaving a man in the lamented attendant's place, and you will be sure to ask him for anything you require until my return!"

And with a shout of derisive laughter, he and his gang departed.

For awhile I strained at the ropes and gnashed at my gag, but I could neither move nor speak. The warm, bleeding corpse of the attendant, and a charred body between us, prevented me from seeing Rollie; but from where I was laid, across the end of the pyre, with my head on the extreme edge, I could see da Silva's man, squatting on the ground, smoking a cigarette.

I will not dwell on the next hour. There are some things it is better to forget; and the feelings of a man to whom life is very dear, waiting slowly to be roasted alive, do not make pleasant reading. After one or two more frenzied paroxysms of struggling I saw that it was hopeless and resigned myself to the end with what fortitude I could. But it was curious, I could not help thinking, that a man like Rollie should have been tricked so easily. Well, we had lived, the two of us—we had lived; and one can't always have the luck: and I hoped that poor old Rollie might go out still unconscious without the agony of the flames.

Then I remembered that Ivor Jourdan, the cause of all our trouble, was at that moment jazzing beautifully in the gilded ball room of Government House, and I swore long and savagely—which was comforting to the soul. And then Rollie's words came back to me—that we were where we were, well, because we happened to be white men; and that thought somehow calmed my senses—though, as I say, that hour was longer than all the rest of my life put together.

At last I was roused by the wailing of da Silva's gang returning once more in the ghastly mockery of a funeral. Turning my head I saw four of them and da Silva carrying another shrouded figure on a charpoy; and as they came through the smoke-grimed gate I saw the man guarding us stand up—and suddenly, as I looked, he slithered in a heap to the ground and vanished round the angle of the pyre, tweaked backwards, as it were, by some invisible force; and then a moment later he stood again in the darkest shadow, salaaming to da Silva as the cortège arrived. Clearly my over-strained mind was playing me fantastic tricks.

Then came da Silva's silky, ironical voice :

"It pains me, Major Dennistoun, not to remove your gag for our talk after all—but you will understand that they are in somewhat of a hurry for this in Gulistan."

He held up the little japanned case in which the cypher was kept.

"So I regret that I cannot remain by you while the flames creep up and lick your quivering flesh, and remind you, when you shriek aloud, in your torment, of the many times you have intruded on my plans. It is a bitter disappointment, for I have never had the pleasure of seeing a white man die by the fire, and I should have dearly loved to have heard from *your* lips, above all, what it feels like. But alas, that must now be left to my *imagination*."

With a shrug of the shoulders he turned and ordered his men to set their torches to the pyre; and with a terrible sinking I heard the fire begin to hiss and splutter underneath me.

"Oh, by the way," went on da Silva, "we have a companion for you here. This fool," he prodded the shrouded figure on the bier with his knife, "sold me the cypher for ten lakhs, but——" he chuckled evilly, "a little wood is cheaper—and safer!"

He gave a sharp order to his followers, who flung that other bound figure on to the further end of the pyre.

"You will forgive me," he continued gloatingly, "a little pride in this piece of work. Not only have I got the cypher, but when day breaks there will be no trace beyond a few unidentifiable ashes. And meanwhile, my friend, while you are waiting for the hot, passionate caresses of da Silva's love, here is something to remember him by!"

Suddenly changing from the suave courtier to the infuriated beast, he strode across and dealt the recumbent body next but one to me three sickening blows on the face with the butt of his knife. "Thus," he snarled, "fare those who cross da Silva's will."

And then an amazing thing happened. So quick was it that almost before the stammering report of the pistol rang out, da Silva's four companions wilted to the ground; and the watchman in the shadows turned and

put another two shots through each of da Silva's shoulders, so that his arms fell helpless at his sides, and he staggered back like a winged partridge against the pyre.

And in the sudden hush came a terrible voice, so steely hard and cold that I scarcely recognised it.

"You've been wasting your breath and your blows on the carcase of your own creature, da Silva, for, thanks to old Muldoo, no knot can hold me long—and we changed places!"

Da Silva cowered away from that awful, avenging figure, his features horribly distorted with terror.

"You will be glad to know," continued Rollie, "that none of your remarks or the pricks of your knife were lost on me, as I recovered consciousness before we left the Grove." The blood-curdling voice grew harder still. "And now, after all, the feelings of a man slowly dying of fire need not be left to your *imagination*."

It is impossible to describe the awful, ice-cold passion with which he spoke those words, and the effect they had upon da Silva. He flung himself on the earth, howling like a beast, and crawled to Rollie's feet.

"For God's sake don't burn me!" he screamed. "Spare my life and I'll give you fifty lakhs—a hundred—anything——"

Rollie drew away from the craven thing that mouthed and crawled around his feet.

"At least," he said, "I will be more merciful than da Silva."

The pistol rang out again: then picking up the cypher, he quickly cut me free.

"Sorry I couldn't do it before, old Jumbo, but it was the devil of a binding and I only managed to slip it in the nick of time. Come on, let's chuck this carrion on to the fire."

And one by one we lifted the bodies on to that grisly pile that was already beginning to crackle and flare.

"I suppose we must save the thief," he said, "though I'd dearly love to let him frizzle."

We dragged off the other bound figure, and as Rollie removed the gag he suddenly clutched me by the arm.

"Oh, my God! look!"

As long as I live I shall never forget my feelings when, in that place of horror, lit up in fits and starts by the flickering glare of the death fires, I looked into the fear-crazed face of Ivor Jourdan.

We sat in Rollie's room next morning. Ivor stood before us, knees trembling, mouth twitching, the picture of mental and moral degradation.

"Why did you do it?" said Rollie sternly.

"I—I was hopelessly in debt—and Joan's people wouldn't hear of us getting married till I was clear," he stammered.

"I suppose a trifle like us being burnt alive was of no consequence!" I put in furiously.

"I'd do anything for Joan," he moaned. "Rollie, for God's sake don't tell her!"

This was too much. I saw red and was beginning to call him every name I could lay tongue to, when Rollie stopped me. He was actually laughing.

"Really, Ivor," he said, "you are a delightful humorist!" and the miserable worm grovelled at his feet, even as da Silva had done. "All right, all right," went on Rollie disgustedly, "I won't tell Joan. But we can't have you floating about in positions of trust—so you'll leave for home by the next mail—see?"

When he had gone I turned to Rollie amazed.

"Surely," I said, "you're not going to let him off scot free? Especially," I added, somewhat impertinently, "things being as they are."

That haunted look, which I was beginning to know, came back into his eyes. "You see, Jumbo," he said quietly, "I can understand his motive."

"Don't be a fool, Rollie," I cried. "Lady Joan is going home, too, next mail, and——"

I was interrupted by Lady Joan herself coming in. There were deep traces of suffering and suspense in her fresh young face.

"How did you get it back, Rollie?" she asked almost in a whisper.

"Ask your precious Ivor," I said brusquely.

"I have," she said, "and he's too dazed to tell me anything."

"H'm!" I grunted; and we looked at each other in a strained silence. Then Rollie laughed lightly, as if at some highly amusing thought.

"I have a confession to make, Joey. I had locked up the cypher in my own safe all the time—and forgotten about it."

"I see," she said slowly, "it's out of loyalty to you that Ivor won't say anything."

I gasped, and Lady Joan's face turned slowly crimson. All the pent-up emotion of the last twelve hours had played old Harry with her nerves, and now the storm burst. I have seen angry women in my time, but the wrath of this beautiful girl was in a class by itself. She literally screamed with rage.

"So poor Ivor has nearly been driven out of his wits with fright through your idiotic carelessness—and you just treat it as an excellent joke!"

"Awfully sorry, Joey," said Rollie contritely.

And then I stood dumbly suffering while the girl that Rollie loved lashed him, flayed his very soul, with a tongue that her love for another—the fierce, maternal, protective love of the strong for the weaker vessel—had made even as a whip of scorpions. When at last she could think of no more bitter things to say, she darted him a glance of biting scorn and flounced out of the room.

As for me, I stood speechless, raging inwardly at the monstrous injustice of it all, till Rollie turned to me with a wry face.

"A woman who can love like that would be worth winning, Jumbo."

Of that I had my own opinion. However, this was not the time to express what I *did* think about females in general, and this one in most particular; and, having done my best about it, I was in a way glad she was going, because I had already learned enough about Mahdipur to know that there was big work looming up ahead for Rollie and me—ugly work of the sort that women are best left out of.



## UPAINAYASHA

STRANGE things happen in India and happen quickly. The man who rode gaily with his best girl before breakfast, is dead before lunch; is buried with three volleys and the "Last Post" before tea; and the band that played him slow-time to the grave is playing lively rag-time at dinner, where uniforms glitter and the wine passes.

If the Sahib dwelt unduly on these things; if the Mem-sahib gave way to that empty aching for a little chubby boy—Sonny *Baba*, as old *ayah* calls him—far away in Devonshire, the work of Empire could not go on: and so they work, the Sahiblog—and when they are not working, they play—hectically perhaps, and sometimes naughtily; but when they are not working they *must* play, for, you see, they dare not stop to think.

They float on the surface of queer, mysterious deeps; on the surface of millions of tortuous minds whose workings are still—and perhaps always will be—to the white man, a strange and dark enigma: and when things happen that would startle Little Muddleford-in-the-Marsh gibbering out of its ancient sleep—well, the Sahiblog just keep on dancing!

But when one morning Rollie Dennistoun arose and regarded—on a level with his dressing-table—the glassy, horror-haunted eyes of Vivian Mandeville staring in at him through the window; and when, on further inspection, he saw the whole naked corpse, scientifically crucified and mutilated in a way that was a horror and an offence against the day, he, even *he*, Rollie Dennistoun, who had looked on death in every hideous form, was badly shaken.

For the plight of that awful thing—blackened and swelling under the sun's fierce rays—which a few hours before had been Vivian Mandeville—was to some extent connected with a practical joke we had played on Vivian during the night. And further, it was one of the very few times that Rollie had failed—utterly and hopelessly failed.

Generally speaking, when the Eastern day dawns on some red horror that was the night before a white man, you may stake your shirt that the trouble was either Woman or Religion. Of the two Religion is the worst, because there you lose yourself in unfathomed caves of primeval gloom; but in this case it seemed that the unfortunate Vivian Mandeville had dabbled in a potent mixture of both those elements—which is nothing less than another name for suicide.

I suppose we—Rollie and I—know as much about that ghastly affair as any white man ever will know; but what manner of lingering agony Vivian endured—as those dead eyes showed; why they crucified him, and how and why they planted the cross in the grounds of Government House, are things that even old Muldoo refuses to elucidate.

Even now, when the subject is mentioned, there comes over Muldoo's face that curious, mystic look of orientals when their religion is in question, and he shakes his head. "The Sahib is my father and my mother," he mutters, "but"—the dark, melting eyes look far and far away into invisible things, and he mutters again—"there are some things it is better that even Dennistoun Sahib should not know."

It started like this. We had been dining the night before with old Ginger Sarson in the Battery Mess. You know, of course, and perhaps sometimes dream about gunner port—wine with a history as mellow as their battle honours and their plate, and the polished mahogany table in which it shines.

And so, when at an immorally early hour of the next morning an ice-cold sponge took me full in the face, I

was not well pleased; and I sat up and cursed Rollie as comprehensively as my aching head would allow.

"You shouldn't have mixed it, Jumbo. Unspeakable sacrilege!"

He shook his head gravely over my profane treatment of that celestial vintage; and I remember that as I looked through bleary eyes at the girlishly slight, mocking figure in blue silk pyjamas, I found it hard to realise that this was a he-man with hair on his chest, and a reputation for dare-devilries that put Los Angeles completely in the shade. As was his way, Rollie got quickly to business.

"A glimpse of your face on your mornings after, Jumbo, would put a bargee off his breakfast, but"—he neatly dodged my slipper and went on—"I've had to face it in the cause of duty!"

"What's up now?" I grunted shortly. Of course I had come to Mahdipur with no illusions about it being the ideal place for a rest cure, but at the moment I did wish things wouldn't begin to happen till a fellow was sure that it was his own head on his shoulders. "What the devil is it this time—battle, murder, or sudden death?"

But I could see that Rollie was really serious.

"Look here, Jumbo," he said quietly, lounging on to the foot of my bed; "you know old Ginger is Garrison Officer of the week? Well, he told me privately last night that the pickets had seen our bright young friend Vivian Mandeville skulking into the 'House of a Hundred Dragons.'"

"The House of a Hundred Dragons"? Phew!" I whistled. Now I make no pretensions to being a plaster saint—far from it. But this was a bit of a staggerer and no mistake.

"Our little Red Cuthbert—going to that place?"

Rollie nodded. "Not a shadow of doubt, I'm afraid. And as he's the Governor's guest here, I asked Ginger not to report it officially, but to let me deal with the matter."

Vivian Mandeville going to the 'House of a Hundred Dragons'! I could hardly believe it. Apart from everything else I didn't think the little blighter had the guts: for he was one of those elegant, egotistical drawing-room

Bolshies, all dressed up in art silks and tints—you know the sort, who are for ever spouting communism and all that stuff, and then travel first-class and send their sons to Eton.

The sort, as Rollie said, who will do anything for notoriety; and when they fail to impress their own kind, immediately join the enemy—thereby to find a vent for their resentment; like the monkeys in the palms out there, that throw filth on your head so that you will notice them. After some pretty doubtful travellings in Russia and America he had come to Mahdipur armed with letters of introduction from weighty political relatives—who, doubtless, wanted to get rid of him—to study, as he said, the Indian Question.

The Governor, who took a robust view of life, regarded him with the same contemptuous toleration with which he regarded a lady's lap-dog. But as Vivian Mandeville's clothes were genuine Bond Street, and as he was widely read, a clever talker, something of a poet, and, above all, wealthy, Lady Bellington pronounced him quite delightful. He had indeed that peculiar personality and appearance which so many women rave about, but which makes the flesh of a proper man to creep.

And so far it seemed that Vivian Mandeville's study of the Indian Question had taken the perfectly harmless form of driving about in state carriages with Her Excellency and her aiguilleted A.D.C.'s to hospital openings and prize-givings and Guide rallies, and being petted and flattered by the damsels of Mahdipur, whose pretty lips cooed "Oh, *how* interesting!" to his startling theories of racial equality, while their busy little brains compared his income favourably with that of the poor but ardent subalterns who raged sulphurously in the offing. And all the time he was going to the "House of a Hundred Dragons"!

"Well, I'm damned," I grunted. "Is it the Lily?"

"The Lily—or the dope. Or perhaps both. He looks like it." Rollie's face had set in hard lines.

"H'm," I growled, "that's one way of studying the Indian Question."

Now the "House of a Hundred Dragons" was very

properly out of bounds for all officials, and an equally strict social ban proscribed it to the commercial community of Mahdipur. It lay well back from the dusty road that runs through the quarter of the big business houses and on down to the harbour; a creeper-covered bungalow hidden in a thick clump of trees; and at night a red paper lantern hung above the entrance; and when a man rang, there were stealthy movements and whisperings, and he felt himself scrutinised by unseen eyes. And when he came out again—it was said—he had left there a part of his soul.

Within, Fu Shan supplied the things that sailor men desire. And inside also, above and beyond the ordinary commodities, was Dilkhusa, the renowned and mysterious Lily. A Kashmiri born, she was, so they said, lovely as her own lovely valleys when the evening sun touches the snows of Pir Panjal with flooding pinks and crimsons; and her face was as white as white lotus petals floating on the Dhal by Shalimar.

But strange—very strange—things were whispered about the Lily. By another name they called her, too, which, being interpreted, meant, “Queen of Caresses”—for, they said, the love of the Lily was as a fire that used up all of a man. Rajahs came to visit her; Rajahs tried to kidnap her; men had been found floating loathsomely in the creek after many days; and far away up in Simla her *dossier* filled one whole pigeon-hole and three parts of another.

Still she remained a mystery. Rollie’s theory was that she was a Votary of Ishtah, who, regardless of gain, received only such as pleased her own fancy: which theory accounted for the madness of young Bromley-Dawson of the South Devons—but there is no use now in recalling that terrible tragedy.

Be all that as it may, it was totally inexcusable for a guest of Government House so to besmirch the British name; and yet for the life of me I couldn’t help being rather thrilled—for though I am probably no less useful than the next person in an open scrap, I’d no more venture into that Chinese devil-house of queer dope, and God knows what filth, than I’d jump into Niagara.

"He's a rummy little reptile, our Piccadilly Marx, is he not?" smiled Rollie.

I concurred emphatically, and wanted to know what Rollie was going to do about it. But Rollie was going to do nothing about the "House of a Hundred Dragons." Absolutely nothing. He said he believed in letting every man cut his own throat in his own way. And if the wizen of Vivian Mandeville were inadvertently slit, the world, as Rollie saw it, would be a no less bright and beautiful place. But there was another matter concerning that same iridescent young artist in which he *did* intend to act, and to act right sharp and sudden. A matter that was far more serious.

"More serious?" I sat up in bed with a jerk.

As Rollie unfolded this other matter I held my aching head and groaned aloud, swearing on my immortal soul never to mix gunner port again—for as the tale proceeded a red anger came into my heart, an anger such as only those who have shouldered the White Man's Burden can understand—and I longed to be at the tip-top of my fighting form for the work that was in hand.

It was a long and involved story that Rollie told me, and one I sometimes found it difficult to follow, for my duties as Commandant of the Bodyguard did not leave me much time to study Indian politics. Very briefly it amounted to this: A number of students and young *intelligentsia* of Mahdipur belonged to a local branch of the Anusilan Samiti—that widespread secret society which, by prostituting the teachings of the Hindu Sacred Books, seeks to inflame the country to rebellion and Swaraj—Home Rule, that is.

Now it seemed that on that very night, for the first time within the knowledge of man, the Seven Stars, which are the Seven Rishis, that is to say the Seven Prophets of the Vedas, were all on the same plane with Earth and the Full Moon. This posture of the Spheres had a profound vedantic significance. Even as the Star of Bethlehem, it portended a long-propheesied revelation; and all the East was rumbling and stirring with intense religious emotion.

It gave me the shivers the way Rollie described it, and

I swear I could feel the soul-stirring of those millions underneath. Even in Europe learned men predicted the end of the world that night, and people huddled together in the streets of London. And in the Nushima Bagh, out beyond the city towards the Gulistan Hills, there was to be a great meeting of the Anusilan Samiti at the rising of the moon—at which no less a person than the Mahatma Krishnavarna himself was going to be present.

Krishnavarna was a figure so essentially vedantic that it is difficult to describe him to white men. Enough to say that he was about half demagogue of Lloyd Georgian magnitude, and half Saint and Teacher no less reverend than the Bodhisat. Only in the East would such a phenomenon be possible; and so great was the spell that his name had cast over the whole continent that I was not a little intrigued at the thought of seeing him in the flesh.

At this point of the story Rollie's big grey eyes suddenly twinkled. The oddest things often seemed to strike him as humorous.

"Now that old reprobate Muldoo," he said, "who'd sell his soul for a rupee, is in no end of a dither himself about this show to-night. He tells me a Message is to be delivered in the Nushima Bagh—and who do you think is going to deliver it?"

"Not Vivian Mandeville?"

Rollie grinned and nodded. "Comical, isn't it? Mind you, I'm not saying that if I was a native myself I shouldn't be all out for Swaraj. But for a dirty little oiled and scented Chelsea twitterer, staying here as the guest of Government and disgracing his caste with the Lily, to go and incite half-baked youths to bloody rebellion, just for the vanity of hearing his own voice, is beyond all limits."

I nodded silently; for when I thought of the insane orgies of crime and murder and the untold sufferings of innocent people that invariably followed such politico-religious meetings as that billed for the Nushima Bagh to-night, my thoughts about Vivian Mandeville were too violent for adequate expression.

Rollie broke the silence.

"Vanity—craving for notoriety—my God! Jumbo, it's a terrible thing!"

"True," I agreed, reaching out for a cigarette, "these hot-air merchants are worse than all the poison-gas of the war. But meanwhile what are we going to do about dear Cuthbert? If we smacked him, Her Ex. would have a fit."

Rollie grinned broadly.

"I've got a little scheme," he said, "which ought to kill two birds with one stone. It will so scare the Vivian bird that he'll quit India like a scalded cat; and also it will quite effectively and informally break up Krishnavarna's meeting—what thing the police could not do without an ugly riot."

"Great!" I shouted, my headache vanishing with a last Parthian pang. Apart from the excitement of the thing I was delighted to see dear old Rollie really spinning again. Neither he nor I had mentioned Lady Joan's name since she had sailed—he did not encourage sentimentality—but there was a miniature on his bedside table—on top of the dog-eared Shakespeare—and there was often that pain in his eyes for which I knew the only anodyne was action.

"Great!" I shouted, "let's have it."

After slowly lighting a cigarette Rollie propounded his plan. It was deliciously simple. Mahdipur, like all Indian borderlands, was continually harassed by raiding gangs from the Gulistan Hills. The plan was just this. He and I and Ginger Sarson and a couple of the latter's subalterns were to dress up as Afridis; raid the meeting—which would straightway rise and flee, for Hindu students have no man-pluck, only hysterical martyr-pluck, particularly in the matter of their especial bugbear, those brutal tribesmen—and then, amid the tumult and the shouting, to carry off young Vivian Mandeville.

I chuckled gleefully. A great scheme. And like all great things, simple.

"What do we do with him then?" I asked.

Rollie's eyes twinkled.

"I thought, after fetching a compass with proper noises and business to Spin Khor, we might perhaps make



a bonfire and do a bit of a Khattak Dance around him. You see," he added chuckling, "I want to scare him once and for all out of unhealthy meddlings!"

I passed that interminable day watching the clock, unable for the first time in my experience to find any interest in a hundred tall men and a hundred glossy horses.

That evening, after half a dozen battling sets of tennis on the Government House new hard courts, there gathered, quite naturally, in our quarters for a bath and change and something out of a glass, old Ginger Sarson and his two stoutest subalterns. Ginger was a great red man, full of beef and beer, with a right arm punch that had made him respected from Aldershot to Amballa; and as to those bright lads Tiger Wade and Chips Cunningham—well, X. Battery R.H.A., was not called the Hell-for-Leather Troop out of compliments' sake! Rollie explained the special idea while we lounged in long chairs and grinned happily.

He told us that these Anusilan Samiti jamborees opened with a certain amount of mumbo-jumbery before the image of Kali—you can never get away from that beastly idol in India—then the Neophytes, the recruits as you might say, took a lurid oath pledging their lives to the cause of freedom, and vowing to sacrifice white goats to the Mother; white goats, Rollie explained with a sweet smile, being a figurative word for our noble selves.

"How frightfully jolly!" gurgled Tiger Wade, his clenched fists already beginning to itch tinglingly.

"Next," went on Rollie in his slow, quiet voice, as though he were talking informally to a mothers' meeting about sterilised milk, "they oblate the arms they've looted in their villainous dacoities before the idol—on the principle of a knight's vigil, you know. And my spies report that, while the arms are laid there in dedication, the charming and popular Vivian Mandeville is scheduled to speak his piece.

"So you see, if we choose that dramatic moment for our rude entrance, we might also abstract, as well as our misguided young friend, those nasty dangerous toys

which our loving Aryan Brother is not quite grown-up enough to be trusted with. Speaking as a white goat, this strikes me as eminently desirable. What say you? "

"Speaking as same," roared Ginger, "I sez, 'ear, 'ear! A little play with the butt," he added longingly, "a tap here and there, would not be out of order, eh, Rollie? "

And the rest of us clamorously supported this most judicious proposal; for of late these sedition-mongering, verbiage-blown parrots had made life unpleasant for all decent men—white or black. Moreover, the Battery had a little private account to settle; inasmuch as Bombardier Jenkinson, No. 2 Section, had been mishandled by a student mob while inoffensively proceeding on his lawful occasions—and Government had regretted that in the circumstances no action could be taken in the matter; and had added a rider that the broken head of Bombardier Jenkinson, R.H.A.—*R.H.A.*—was of no political significance!

In a sort of hushed and holy awe the orderly room staff had listened for exactly twenty-three minutes to Ginger's comments on that memo. which concluded with bellows to the effect that while any hyphenated wog might smite him or his with propriety, if *he* or any man of his Battery so much as laid a hiatused kid glove on the odoriferous hide of a doubly qualified nigger they'd be something well broke on the spot by the unprintably inexpressible politicians.

And yet they had the tri-sulpheretted cheek to expect men—*men*—to go on serving in this misbegotten, parblistered, thrice God-forsaken country! Things rankle with a red man, especially if the red man be one who loves his Battery with a love passing the love of women. Wherefore Ginger murmured again, persuasively.

"A little loose-play, Rollie, a tap here and there."

But Rollie reviled him for a passionate and blood-thirsty ruffian. "I know your taps, Ginger—and likewise the fragility of a wog's head—and we don't want any awkward complications. And remember, they'll be hundreds to one, so our job is to coup our *coup* with no unnecessary dallyings."

"One right and left in passing," pleaded Ginger earnestly, and his face and the faces of the two boys were so pathetically wistful and plaintive that, against his better judgment, Rollie softened.

"One right and left then," he conceded reluctantly; after which concession we proceeded to the make-up—and an hour later there sprawled incongruously in the long chairs, drinking out of long glasses, and waiting for the sun to set, as villainous looking a gang of Afridis as ever put the fear of Allah into a frontier village—all bristling with great hairy beards and murderous Pathan knives, and armed as well with service rifles, which I had smuggled down from the Bodyguard lines.

Long, long ago, outside the city, towards the wicked grim-grey hills, a Mogul Emperor had fashioned the Nushima Bagh, straight out of the Arabian Nights, for the pleasure of his Light of Love. Then came avenging Sivajee; and on the pearly dais, amid the cypress and the jasmine and the tinkling waters, where had been a dream of mother-o'-pearl and fretted marble, airy and delicate as lace and gemmed with glittering madura work, that had been the pavilion of Nur Mahal, now grinned the stark idol of Kali the Destroyer.

A blood-red moon came swinging over the hills as we crept cautiously into one of the pinnacled cupolas of the decaying outer wall. And the scene that met our eyes—and what followed—so totally different from what we had expected, came like a cold douche to our hilarious spirits, and filled us with a sort of uncanny dread.

The ceremony had already begun. The rays of that great swiftly-climbing moon illumined with its unearthly light a great mob of ghostly figures, silent, gleaming-eyed, squatting around the dais, and stretching far away in endless rings that faded into the dimness of the distant shadows.

The light of the moon struck full on the majestic, saffron-robed form of Krishnavarna, standing on the dais, before the image of Kali, and—to our intense disgust—on the slight form of Vivian Mandeville, draped also in the ascetic's saffron robe, with glaring yellow caste mark

on his forehead. On the dais stood only those two. And the moon's rays glinted on weapons laid at the idol's feet—even as Rollie had said—in dedication for their bloody work.

As we looked Krishnavarna slowly raised his hand, and the front circle rose and stood like spectres, each with right arm outstretched towards the idol. A sigh, a sort of shiver, as of wind in the leaves, souged through the assembly. Then silence again, a hush profoundly significant. And as Krishnavarna began to speak, Tiger Wade sniggered and suddenly stopped; and I felt the hair rising on my scalp; for in some mysterious way Krishnavarna's voice, deep and sounding as a temple gong, seemed one with the illimitable void above us and that aspect of the Spheres which man had never known before.

As the organ notes flowed out, dimensions fell away and there was a sense of boundless space. Those deep-set, glowing eyes were not as the eyes of mortal man. I felt—we all felt—that we were in the presence of the Unknown. On and on it rolled, that voice that was as the voice of Eternity, in sonorous Sanskrit periods, till it came at last to the form of the Anusilan Oath.

“Om Bande Mataram ! ” it began; and the dire words were repeated after him by the arm-raised spectres in an echoing wail. Nothing more eerie can be imagined than that voice, and those moon-shadows, taking the Oath of Blood. I could hear Ginger swearing softly and ceaselessly under his breath for comfort's sake. Among us only Rollie was unshaken.

“Swearing to do in the likes of Ginger,” he whispered to us; and that light whisper brought us back to earth with a crash. After all Krishnavarna and Co. were nothing but a lot of cold-blooded murderers, and had to be dealt with as such.

When, with further ritual, the Oath was sealed and the neophytes sank back into the crowd, Krishnavarna again uplifted his arm and began to speak. And again, though for the life of me I cannot explain why, the skin prickled on my scalp. This time Krishnavarna spoke in English, and though his actual words were commonplace, there was a quality in them that seemed to pass over our heads,

right through the heart of that spell-bound, ghostly audience, and out into the unfathomable immensity of the stars.

I now had an absurd feeling that I was being left out of something; something I could not understand; something bigger far than myself. And I found that, try as I might, I couldn't take my eyes off Krishnavarna. Like some old figure out of the Bible he stood there with up-lifted hand.

"Thus was it written," he intoned, "that on this night, when the Seven Rishis and Holy Bishma should turn their faces towards Bharatvarsha, there comes a brother from the West with the Message. As it was written, so has it befallen."

He paused; and again that rippling stir of emotion shook and trembled through the serried ranks. The air was tense with expectation. We felt it, searching, palpable. Then Krishnavarna, taking Vivian Mandeville by the right hand, led him to the feet of Kali, and halting, faced around once more.

"But ere he speak the Message," he said, "it is further written in the Law, as ye all know, that our Brother from the West shall swear the Anusilan Oath. Therefore, Brother," he turned to Vivian, "say after me, 'Om Bande Mataram . . .'"

Words fail utterly to express our feelings when we watched an Englishman abasing himself before that filthy idol and repeating the long, high-sounding oath which vowed his life—no less—to the slaughter of white men and women whose crime was toiling for the welfare of India. Some emotions are too deep for words. Ginger breathed heavily, and there was a cold, terrible gleam in Rollie's eyes. By God! as he had said, vanity is a terrible thing!

The Oath administered in full, Krishnavarna led Vivian Mandeville to the front of the dais. Even though I now loathed the very sight of the renegade, I could not help admitting that he made a striking figure, in the moonlight there, draped in his saffron toga; and I noticed that around his neck was a heavy collar, made out of great lumps of raw turquoise, clasped in front with a large golden locket.

"Filthy little play-acting swine!" growled Rollie savagely.

Then, amid a hush, painful in its intensity, came the deep tones of Krishnavarna.

"Brother from the West, I charge you deliver the Message!"

There was that in the voice which made me catch my breath in excitement, and a gasp went up from the dense throng of ghosts that was almost a sob.

In the electric silence that followed, and obviously enjoying the sensation, Vivian Mandeville, after a long, tense pause, raised his hand and began to speak.

Now there is no doubt that he *could* speak. What it was all about I don't pretend to know—the whole thing was in a mystic jargon, all mixed up with Hindu mythology and Sanskrit names that was completely Greek to me. But he had a wonderful platform voice, and the way he used it, as well as the extraordinary brightness of his eyes, gave me the impression that he was unnaturally exalted; which impression was shortly confirmed by a whisper from Rollie. "Dope," he said, "full of it."

But the strange thing was that though Krishnavarna put the wind up me every time he spoke, Vivian's brilliant performance only filled me with unutterable disgust for a hollow sham. One knew he was acting. But he had, nevertheless, a tremendous hold over his audience. As he proceeded, they grew more and more excited; and every time he mentioned a certain word—Upainayasha, it sounded like—they broke out into a low, dolorous moaning that was horrible to hear. And I wondered with growing curiosity what on earth this Upainayasha could be. I asked Rollie, but he was just as puzzled as I was.

At last Vivian Mandeville drew to his peroration.

"Brethren of the East," he declaimed, "on this night, as the Holy Ones above us, now standing in their ancient order, shall be my witness, I deliver to you that Sign and Symbol for which ye have long waited as token of our Message from the West."

He paused; and there rose that tremulous plaintive cry, "Upainayasha!"—so weird and eerie that it sent

shivers down my spine. When it had died away Vivian Mandeville took a step forward and, flinging open the locket with a dramatic gesture, cried aloud :—

“ Behold ! the Upainayasha ! ”

A sudden stillness fell—more awful than any sound. And clutching convulsively at the empty locket, Vivian turned ashen grey, his eyes went wild and staring, and he staggered backward, his features distorted with an indescribable terror.

“ Not quite according to plan, I think ! ” breathed Rollie.

For an eternity that terrible silence held; then, from the gleaming-eyed, squatting crowd came a long-drawn yell of anguish, as of keening at a death bed. “ Upainayasha ! Upainayasha ! ” they wailed; and the shuddering cry swelled into a full-throated howl that echoed and quavered away into the vault of heaven.

And in that weird and awful cry there sounded the passing of a Great Hope.

“ Look, Jumbo ! ”

Rollie’s voice shook as he gripped my arm and pointed. And I saw that the whole mob of ghosts was stirring, moving forward, crawling, it seemed, on all fours towards the dais. And again and again rose that despairing shriek of tormented souls—Upainayasha ! Upainayasha !—rose and fell and quavered through the spaces, till far out on the hills the ghoulish jackals took up the cry and mocked it with their maniac laughter—than which there is no more desolate sound under the stars. Never had I witnessed anything half so creepy as this incomprehensible thing.

Then Krishnavarna stepped to the edge of the dais and raised his hand; and instantly the crawling ceased; and when he spoke there was in his voice the sorrow of all Calvary.

“ One, lifting our Veil, hath betrayed the Word. What says the Law ? ”

This time it came without hate, without anger, but deadly cold, in a long sobbing whisper—Upainayasha ! Upainayasha !—a low, sighing sound that was like the breaking of many hearts. Yet we knew it was the voice

of doom; and silently the mob of spectres began to surge towards their betrayer.

"Ready?" snapped Rollie.

"Leave him," growled Ginger furiously, "he's asked for whatever he's going to get——" and we other three thought that Ginger was entirely right. But Rollie shook his head.

"Guest of Government House," he said shortly; which, since he put it that way, clinched the matter.

"Now let fly a few rounds rapid over their heads, and follow me," he ordered.

When a sudden ragged volley crackled out, followed by the blood-curdling Afridi yell, "*La Allah ill'alla madad i khudha-a-a-ah!!*"—and a rush of wild tribesmen came tumbling over the wall, the whole scene froze into the stillness of a moonlight *tableau*. The foremost of the press stood stock still within a few feet of Vivian Mandeville, their fingers crooked towards him; and that young man himself seemed turned to stone—but for the agony of terror in his eyes.

And when still yelling uncouthly, we collected the pistols and rushed him over the wall, helped forcibly from behind by Ginger's toe; and when, after some pretty rapid moving, we halted at a respectable distance and Rollie tersely explained the situation to him, he seemed too dazed to show either surprise or relief—he just stared at us like a man with shell-shock, muttering that cursed word Upainayasha.

"What the hell is this Upainayasha?" demanded Rollie.

But he only mumbled and gibbered unintelligible nonsense about signs of the Zodiac. Then, as though a sudden thought struck him, he let out a piercing scream.

"The Lily's got it! I went there on my way to the meeting. Let me go to her—oh, for God's sake let me go! let me go!"

He struggled frantically, but we kept a firm hold.

"No, my lad," said Rollie, "you've got into enough mischief for one night. You're quite safe," he added contemptuously to the shuddering creature, "except that *we* shall have a word to say to you later."



"Safe?" whispered Vivian hoarsely—"safe? You don't understand—how should you? Ordinary death is nothing—but the Upainayasha—oh, my God, my God!"

He buried his head in his hands and burst into a dreadful blubbering—a terrible, hardly human sound, such as you hear from the operating table in hospitals; and then fell on his knees and howled frenziedly to be allowed to go to the Lily.

"Only she can save me," he screamed, with that nameless horror in his eyes. "Oh, my God, my God, the Upainayasha! Let me go, I say—oh, let me go!"

"Come, pull yourself together," said Rollie, dragging him not ungently to his feet. And to us he whispered—"It's the dope dying out of him—they often have the horrors after."

And as we hurried him along, dreadfully blubbering, that terror in his eyes, that seemed to reflect some dread thing beyond human ken, dispelled our righteous anger, and we felt that he had already been punished enough.

And then a strange thing happened. When we were passing the "House of a Hundred Dragons," quick as a flash, he tripped up Rollie, winded me with his elbow, and darted up the avenue.

"Well, I'm damned," I spluttered furiously, gasping for breath. "Come on! he's bought a thick ear this time."

But Rollie stopped us. "No," he said. "A gang of Pathan raiders suddenly hurrooshing in there would mean hell's own rough-house, and God knows how many nasty deaths."

Ginger and his boys grinned expectantly in the moonlight and sought to dissuade him.

"I foresee a very pretty little scrap," rumbled Ginger. "Come on, Rollie, let's have six pennorth."

But Rollie was firm. He pointed out that if by any regrettable mischance the perforated bodies of certain of the King's Officers were found, dressed as Pathans, in the "House of a Hundred Dragons," such an incident would assuredly give rise to misunderstanding, and further, would be prejudicial to good order and the Name

of the British Raj. "No," he said, "we've saved his skin once—it's up to him now."

And, somewhat reluctantly, we left it at that—for when Rollie said a thing, he meant it.

But when we arrived back in our quarters, old Muldoo was waiting. Never had I seen the old image so agitated. He at once started questioning Rollie, who quickly narrated the events of the night. "The trouble seems to be," Rollie concluded, "that he's mislaid something called the Upainayasha."

Whereupon Muldoo began to tremble all over, and gazed at us with something of the same terror we had seen in Vivian Mandeville's eyes.

"Upainayasha!" he wailed, like an echo of the despairing wail that had chilled our blood in the Nushima Bagh.

Rollie shook him roughly by the shoulders. "What is this blasted Upainayasha?" he shouted; whereupon Muldoo slid to the ground and salaamed till his forehead touched Rollie's feet.

"Sahib," he faltered, "thou saved my second son from the lame tiger, and my life is thine. Yet this—I dare not tell thee."

There was a silence, broken only by our heavy breathing, during which we avoided each other's eyes, and the old native grovelled in abject terror with his head on the ground. For my part I felt I'd rather face a hundred barrages than this infernal mystery thing. "But," the old conjuror began to mumble at last, "but, because Muldoo loves thee—I tell thee this. If thou would save thy countryman, run quickly—lest it be too late."

Not another word could we get out of him. Obviously it was a matter of life and death—or worse than death. A white man up against some heathenish idolatry. "Run quickly—lest it be too late!"

"A white man," said Ginger simply, voicing all our thoughts; and Rollie nodded, and we wasted no more time on pros and cons and possible contingencies.

It was less than five minutes later that we burst down the barred door and dashed into the "House of a Hun-

dred Dragons." We'd arranged *en route* that three of us were to hold up the saloon while Rollie and Ginger tore Vivian Mandeville from the arms of the Lily and rushed him out—what time we covered the retirement. But as the door crashed in we saw that these precautions were unnecessary. The saloon was a scene of indescribable wreckage.

Tables, chairs, glasses, bottles, overturned, shattered, strewn the floor; and crumpled forms lay about in horribly grotesque attitudes—some still clawing and jerking convulsively. Across the bar, with his yellow face resting on his arms, as though he might be dozing, but for a filmy gleam in the half-closed, slit-like eyes that squinted ironically at us, lay Fu Shan.

"Lest it be too late!" shouted Rollie, and rushed on into the Lily's boudoir; then stopped—stopped abruptly, with a stifled exclamation on his lips.

Now I am not what you might call an impressionable man where the fairies are concerned—have always been too busy with work and polo—but when I gazed on the wonderful beauty of that dead Lily, reclining so naturally among the silks and cushions and rich embroidered stuffs of her divan, the carmined lips just parted, dark lashes shading the marble cheeks under closed lids, I dimly understood poor Bromley-Dawson's madness. She was like the loveliest, tenderest picture of Scheherazade—only a thousand times more so; and the appeal of her frail exquisiteness made me understand too, for the first time, those feelings they write about in the passionate novels.

Before our eyes a priceless piece of art lay broken. Suddenly there was a choke, and Chips Cunningham turned quickly away; then old Ginger, bulldog, beef-eating Britisher, started blowing his nose like a fog-horn.

With a gentle hand Rollie put back the night-black tresses from that snowy brow.

"Look!" he said softly.

No bigger than a sixpence, and standing out in angry red, was a fresh-burned brand—clearly defined and mystical, a cypher of the Zodiac.

Too late !

Till the first glimmer of false dawn five Pathans raged furiously through the bazaars, forgetting all but that somewhere in the night a white man writhed in some untold Gethsemane—yet knowing in their hearts that it was already too late.

It was scarcely an hour after we had gone to bed when Rollie roused me and led me to the grisly thing that hung outside his window.

“Quick, Jumbo,” he said, “before the varletry are about.”

With scented handkerchiefs tied over our mouths and noses—for the Indian sun is no respecter of persons—we did our gruesome work. Already over the black, protruding tongue ants crawled; and over the head a red-necked vulture flapped. Only in the eyes, those ghastly, staring eyes that would not close, dwelt horror incarnate. And as we covered the poor thing decently in its own bed, Rollie pointed to the brand on the forehead, that was the same as the brand on the Lily’s forehead, and he said in a low voice :

“What dreadful things were done last night, only those dead eyes can tell us now—for the East does not yield up its secrets.”

“Perhaps better not,” I said, shuddering.

And that afternoon, when the Dead March throbbed and wailed on the lonely cemetery road, the Sahiblog paused for two moments in their work and their play, and regretfully shook their heads that so wealthy and brilliant a young man as Vivian Raymond Eagles Devine Mandeville, Fellow of Christ Church, Oxford, should have committed the not uncommon indiscretion of stepping on a cobra in his bath-room.

And there the matter rests.

## THE AKALI JATHA

YOUR pretty little cousin who is going out for the cold weather imagines that India is all tennis and bandstand, champagne and glittering functions—with a manna of paladins in polo kit to escort her on her morning rides. In his honest grumbling old heart, John Citizen thinks much the same; and when about twice a week he sees at breakfast the gloomy headlines :

### SERIOUS SITUATION IN THE PUNJAB AKALI JATHAS AGAIN ACTIVE

he wisely skips on to more exhilarating items about the latest Tube Strike or a sensational disclosure in the Sandy Bay Murder Case.

But whenever *my* eye falls on those headlines, Aubrey Martyr's ghastly face comes up before me, and there flashes again through my mind in vivid panorama all the scenes of that amazing night—that breathless, inconceivable night, when we—old Rollie and I—played for—I dare not say how big a stake—perhaps, an Empire.

Rumours, of course, vague distorted rumours of that extraordinary affair, found their way into the papers; so that when Aubrey Martyr was awarded the C.I.E., sun-browned men in every bar from Gulmarg to Mandalay solemnly rejoiced and called aloud for further cock-tails.

Only, on the rare occasions when *we* met him afterwards, Aubrey Martyr, the publicly-worshipped hero of that dramatic episode, displayed a strange embarrassment—which thing, perhaps, is not so remarkable as it might appear on the surface.

In a continent like India, where there are some three

hundred million people and slightly more than that number of gods, mostly hating each other with a fanatical intensity of hatred which the man at home could never even begin to understand, it is obvious that the cares of state lie heavily on our Administrators. Wherefore, His Excellency, whenever possible, escaped from the pomps and ceremonies of Government House, slipped into a shabby old khaki jacket, and, taking Rollie and me with him, motored out for an hour's snipe-shooting on one of the *jheels* that lay around the outskirts of Mahdipur.

One evening we were strolling back from Kurrapura *Jheel* to a *Dak* bungalow just across the road where we had left our car, when we were startled by the sound of a great shout going up in the distance—a shout that—I confess it—chilled us to the marrow; for those were critical days in India, no man knowing what might happen next, and many fearing the worst—and we instantly recognised in that hoarse cry that *timbre* of religious intolerance and frenzy that is the sure prelude to scenes of blood and horror.

Hardly had we dropped down behind a clump of cactus before it broke out again—that fierce, white-hot shout that bubbled like molten lava from some seething volcano of the Oriental mind, and rolled ominously across the wide expanse of stone and scrub-mottled plain.

*Sri wah guru ji ka Khalsa ! !*

It burst out in a terrific crescendo—nearer this time, so that the vultures flapped up in a crowd from a red carcase by the roadside.

Rollie whistled. “Sikhs !” he muttered significantly; then suddenly gripping my arm.

“Good Lord ! look !”

Over the crest of a rise on our left there hove into view a body of about a hundred men, coming down at great speed towards us—swinging along the dusty ribbon of a road at a sort of long-loping, tireless jog-trot. And as they drew nearer to where we crouched behind the cactus, raising at intervals their sinister shout, we saw that every man wore the long sword-dagger and the black turban of the Sikh fanatic.

"Akalis!" whispered the Governor, divining that behind the march of those bearded, dust-grimed men, there boded a terrible menace to the peace of India.

And although, in all conscience, an Akali Jatha—that is to say, a band of Sikh fanatics on the warpath—is as bad a business as any man may wish to avoid, Rollie's low-voiced remark awoke us with a shock to the fact that this thing before our eyes was worse, many times worse, than any ordinary Akali Jatha.

"The leader"—he pointed to an old Hebrew prophet-looking greybeard at the head of the band—"is Rangbir Singh, Subadar of the 159th, and the others"—his voice, though calm, suggested a situation of incalculable gravity—"are his company!"

"Impossible!" stammered the Governor aghast. "There's no stauncher regiment in the service than the 159th!"

But it is the unexpected that happens in India—and Rangbir Singh it was—an austere and distinguished old Indian officer who had upheld the proud name of his regiment from Ypres to Kut-al-Mara, and had been decorated in Buckingham Palace by the King's own hand. And those wild-eyed, half-naked fanatics behind him were, sure enough, the famous Sikh Company of the 159th. It was a case of open, flagrant mutiny.

In breathless silence we watched them jog swiftly past; knowing that this mass desertion from a crack regiment must be a portent of some sudden vast upheaval; picturing, with our mental eye, a vision of such warrior bands pouring out of every village over the whole wide face of that illimitable northern plain.

No one has ever accused me of being unduly imaginative; yet, as that stern company, tossing up their arms in a last wild shout, vanished into the blood-red murk of the sunset, I knew with a sort of prophetic instinct that now, if ever, India had need of *men*.

"You don't think they're out to—to——"

The Governor broke off, regarding Rollie anxiously—who, at once reading his thoughts, replied with a nod.

"To seize the Phulki Gurdwara? Not a doubt of it, Sir."

Even in the tension of that desperate moment I could not help marvelling at how Rollie, without the slightest effort, carried in his head every light and shade of that interminably intricate skein of conflicting creeds and passions that made up what the papers call the Central Asian question.

But, the first shock over, that robust old sportsman, the Governor, was once more the man of action.

"Thank goodness, Aubrey Martyr's spending the week-end at Government House!" He started doubling towards the car. "Come on, boys."

Stopping only at the nearest telegraph office to summon the military authorities instantly to Government House, we raced back at a pace that startled even the languid bullock-wagon drivers out of their perpetual sleep.

"Poor old Colonel!" I thought, as, tumbling out of the car, we dashed straight into the Governor's private office—where the soldiers were already awaiting us—for the little terrier-man's weather-beaten face had gone as white as his little white bristle of moustache, and his face was the face of a man whose soul had been submerged by the waters of Marah.

"My—my Sikhs," he muttered brokenly, "I'd, I'd have staked my life . . ." he buried his head in his hands and moaned aloud—"Oh, God, my Sikhs—my Sikhs!"

"Come! this is no time for vain regrets!" The General spoke sharply; and we gathered round the table—the keen-faced, be-ribboned Staff Officers, the broken-hearted little Colonel of the 159th, the three of us in *shikar* kit—every face growing graver and graver as the Governor quickly related that ominous scene by the Kurrapura *Jheel*—each knowing in his heart that the fate of India—and more—was hanging in the balance.

"I've sent down to the tennis courts for Martyr," the Governor concluded, "who, as you know, General, is our greatest expert on the Sikhs. He—but here he is!"

Aubrey Martyr walked briskly in with an eager light shining in his eyes. He was a very good-looking fellow with a nose and a chin, who had risen quite phenomenally



young to so important a post as Deputy Commissioner of the Phulki District; and his popularity was, I think, greatly due to a sort of romantic adventurousness that saved him from any taint of the official prig, and, in fact, kept him boyishly young. His eyes fairly sparkled with excitement as he listened to the Governor's story.

"As General Chatwynd suggests," Lord Bellingdon said tentatively, "nothing could be easier than to round up these deserters with the Armoured Car Company. But"—he looked questioningly at Aubrey—"dare we risk it?"

Aubrey emphatically shook his head.

"Fatal, sir, fatal! The Akali Sikh Sabha is as sensitive in every fibre as the nerve-ganglion of a neurasthenic octopus."

"Such a step," he warned us gravely, "would immediately be interpreted as interference with their religious liberty—and, in the present state of religious ferment, would most certainly be fraught with disastrous consequences. You see, sir," he explained to the General, who was new to India, "the position is very briefly this. "The Akali Sikh Sabha is a Puritan movement—much like the Reformation in Europe—vowed to the purging of Sikhism from the impurities that have crept into it. On the one side is the great majority of the Sikh community, contented with things as they are, asking only to be allowed to drive their trades in peace. On the other side, this fanatical and extremely violent minority—who, above all, are determined to expel the hereditary *Mahant* or priest of the Phulki Gurdwara—their principle temple—and forcibly replace him with a man of their own persuasion."

"The difficulty, in a nutshell, is this"—the Governor interrupted, impatient of this long explanation of what was so familiar to most of us—"if we molest these deserters—this Akali Jatha, as it calls itself—every Akali in the Punjab will be up. If we don't arrest them other Jathas will join them *en route*, and, as Martyr says, attempt to seize the Phulki Gurdwara by force. In that case the inhabitants of Phulki, who have about as much love for the Akalis as the Cavaliers had for the

Roundheads, and with whom the present *Mahant* is very popular, will certainly rise to a man to support him.

"And then—if I know anything of India—there will follow an outbreak of red horror that would shame the dark ages. You see, General, the devilishly delicate predicament we're in? If we enforce the law, there'll be a religious émeute. If we allow the Akalis to break the law, there'll be a civil uprising. What the deuce are we to do?"

And then it was that Aubrey Martyr, his nostrils dilating, his chest heaving with a powerful emotion, jumped out of his chair.

"I have long foreseen this situation, sir," he cried eagerly. "If you will give me a free hand, I believe I can settle the whole affair once and for all, without a single drop of blood being shed."

Needless to say, these words, uttered with such fiery ardour, created a sensation. We stared at him with wonder, that fast deepened into admiration as he unfolded his plan—the brilliancy of it, the sheer audacity of the thing, fairly taking my breath away.

"You know, sir," he addressed himself to the Governor, although he again spoke primarily for the General's information, "you know, sir, of late there have been strange rumours about the Sikhs. A superstition has been fast gaining ground among them that a New Guru, a sort of Messiah, is coming from the Northern Passes to scourge their creed of its Hindu abuses?"

At these words a quick gleam shot through Rollie's eyes.

"That is so," he nodded, speaking for the first time; although I noticed he had watched Aubrey throughout the discussion with an odd, calculating glance.

"Well," Aubrey went on, his dark eyes glittering, "I have talked all this over with my very wise and human old friend, the *Mahant* of Phulki, who"—Aubrey smiled—"is by no means disposed to resign his see without fighting to the last."

Again Rollie nodded. *Mahant* Nihal Singh of Phulki was, apparently, a man after his own heart.

"Quite so, Martyr, quite so—but your plan?" asked the Governor impatiently.

"One minute, sir. It is not realised how profound a significance attaches to that manuscript recently discovered at Amritsar. Sikh savants believe it to be in the hand of the Fifth Guru himself. It contains an obscure passage which many of them interpret as an edict that the Phulki Gurdwara shall ever remain in the line of Great Nanak, the Founder. And"—Aubrey made a triumphant gesture—"old *Mahant Nihal* is the direct descendant!"

"Yes, yes," the Governor muttered testily, "but these are abstruse matters of dogma. We cannot officially——"

"Officially——" Aubrey smiled. "No! but unofficially . . ." He broke off, as it were, irrelevantly. "It is conceded, I believe, that I have a little knowledge of the Sikhs?"

We all nodded, for it was already a legend that he had passed thirteen days amid the inner mysteries of the Amritsar *Mela* without ever having been even once suspected. And then, pausing for a moment to give greater effect to what followed, he proceeded in a piece of vivid word-painting to outline what I have already said was the boldest and most dazzling stroke ever conceived in Oriental policy. And all the while he spoke, his voice thrilled with the exaltation of a glowing spirit that was swept onward and upward out of itself by the fire of a great purpose.

He depicted for us, in burning words I cannot hope to reproduce, the courtyard of the Phulki Temple, thronged with many thousands of both the Sikh parties. He almost made us see and feel that dark-faced multitude, blazing with indescribable intensity of fanatical passions—gripping their weapons as they awaited the time of the dawn prayer; at which, according to the *Granth Sahib*, their Holy Writ, they must first formally indict the *Mahant*—(and even the faith-crazed Akalis dare not disobey the *Granth Sahib's* dread decree.)

"And then!" cried Aubrey, his voice reaching the climax of an intolerably poignant situation, "when, according to the Sacred Law, *Mahant Nihal* should rise to speak in his defence, there will rise—not he, but—the New Guru of the Passes!"

We gasped.

"You?" muttered the Governor.

"Yes, I!—suitably arrayed for the occasion. I shall first declaim the passage from the newly discovered manuscript, thereby settling the Gurdwara question for ever; and then I shall amplify it in a few plain words such as their thick heads can understand, chiding them in my character of New Guru for this dissension, which, contrary to all moral law, and the law of the *Granth Sahib* itself, is splitting Sikhism asunder."

"But—but will that somewhat questionable manuscript satisfy the Akalis?" The Governor fretted dubiously with his moustache. Aubrey, however, was certain that it would—and his word in all that concerned the Sikh was final.

"No Sikh," he assured us positively, "much less an Akali, would dare to question so august an authority as that ordinance in the Fifth Guru's long-dead hand. Especially," he added, smiling, "when it is delivered from the lips of the Guru of the Passes!" He turned to the Commandant of the 159th with a twinkle in his eye. "I'll let your men down gently, Colonel—tactfully letting fall a word to the effect that such soldiers as have come on pilgrimage to Phulki may return to their regiments and no questions asked!"

I could only stare at Aubrey with the veneration of one who realises at last that Brain is mightier than Brawn. But the Governor's voice was a little husky as he laid a hand on Aubrey's shoulder.

"You're a married man, Martyr. If—if things went wrong—you understand?—we could take no official cognisance."

But Aubrey's answer was as stirring as any of the speeches of those great Romans that Rollie was always reading about in his old Shakespeare.

"I was not allowed to join up for the war, sir," he cried, all afire, "and all my life I've dreamed of doing something, some fine, great flaming thing for the service of my country. And now, sir," his voice shook with passionate enthusiasm, "it's come at last—my chance! the opportunity to do a thing which"—his fervent sin-

cerity robbed the truism of any bombast or conceit—"which I am the only living white man qualified to do."

Amid an involuntary murmur of emotion, the Governor, still doubtful, looked at Rollie.

"It's risking one man's life to save, perhaps, thousands," said Rollie, with what I felt was a somewhat brutal calm. And that clinched the matter.

Having changed in hectic haste out of my *shikar* kit, I dashed to Rollie's office to talk over this mind-enthralling mission of Aubrey's, growing every moment more and more excited over it, and the thought of all the staggering issues that depended on its success—more excited, in fact, than I had ever been since those fateful days of August '14. And in the door, I collided with Aubrey's wife, Bridget Martyr.

She was a cheery-faced woman with just the shadow of a little dark moustache, and a sun-burned V on her chest, who, kind friends said, hadn't a thought in the world beyond tennis and riding. I murmured my apologies with a touch of pity, understanding a little of what the feelings of even this sports-centred woman must be in face of her husband's desperate enterprise. But, ignoring my presence, she marched straight up to Rollie.

"Aubrey has started," she said, staring him straight in the eyes, "to make his arrangements with the *Mahant*. Shall I follow him to Phulki?"

Oddly embarrassed in the silence that followed her remark, I saw that Rollie was looking at her, not with a strong man's compassion for a woman in distress, but as man to man. And when he did answer, that short monosyllable contained a meaning that seemed to pass far above my head.

"No," he said abruptly—just that one word; at which Bridget Martyr laughed harshly.

"You think there are things in a man's life that—that his wife should not see?"

"In a life-time—once, or perhaps twice," he answered enigmatically. Then, as he pushed her gently out of the door, the old, winning smile flitted over his face.

"Leave this thing to me, Biddy."

"What the devil was she driving at?" I cried, when

the door had closed behind her; and as Rollie, apparently sunk deep in thought, did not reply, I hotly upbraided him for treating so brutally a poor woman who had every prospect of being a widow before the next twenty-four hours were out.

"There's old Aubrey doing this splendid thing," I cried, "going out alone to face a howling mob of thousands of the most blood-thirsty religious maniacs that ever made this earth a shambles—one white man—alone——"

Rollie interrupted with a sudden grin.

"Not alone, Jumbo—there'll be two other white men with him!"

"Two others—*who*?" I shouted in my excitement.

"Who else but you and I, old Jumbo?" he drawled with that gay, whimsical air that always descended upon him when momentous affairs were afoot. Who else but you and I?"

And when, in my uncontrollable excitement, I violently demanded that he drop this mystery business and come down to brass tacks, he grew suddenly serious again.

"Aubrey Martyr and I were in the Winchester XI together," he said, speaking slowly, as though on a subject which he had pondered long and deep. He was head of the college, and a brilliant bat. And then—you remember the fire of 1910, Jumbo?"

"What fire?" I asked, more puzzled than ever. But Rollie's thoughts seemed to have jumped to other things. "But for that wife of his . . ." he mused reflectively; then swinging round on me, he abruptly harked back to the subject in hand.

"Aubrey was quite right about those rumours of a New Guru from the Passes, Jumbo. The whole Sikh community is seething with expectation. But——" he chuckled, "what neither Aubrey, nor the poor old thick-headed Sikhs themselves know, is that pretty well the whole of this Akali agitation is a diabolically engineered political move—and that this wonderful New Guru, whose advent has been so widely advertised, is nothing more or less than a paid agent of 'Smith!' "

"Smith?" I stared at Rollie in a sort of dumb-founded awe. It was characteristic of him that while our whole minds were engrossed by the breathless drama being enacted within the scope of our own visions, *his* mind should have been reaching far away back into the nebulous horizon of world-wide causes.

There is a little room at the end of a gloomy corridor in the War Office, and its counterpart in the ramshackle, chalet-like A. H.Q. of Simla, which are the temples of this mysterious power "Smith." "Smith" is not, of course, the actual and monthly-changed name, but it is by one something like it that that sinister agency which overshadows our civilisation is spoken of by the inner circle.

And it is in these two little offices that the underground and malignant currents of that dark power—part-glances of whose activities periodically break out in the Press, but in such vague form that plain men only laugh, as at some grotesque nightmare of disordered brains—in those two little offices, I say, the world-encircling currents of that sinister Power, its motives, schemes and combinations, have been meticulously focussed down upon a small group of living men, manipulating, through an infinite network of lesser agencies, all the turmoil and unrest that torments the world to-day.

While he spoke, Rollie took out of his safe a world-map, charted with the motions of this agency—charted as clearly as the unseen movements of the atmosphere are charted on a Greenwich weather survey—only more accurately.

"This, Jumbo," he said ironically, indicating a purple graph, "shows the vagaries of His Extreme Holiness the New Guru of the Passes! He deserted from our Army in 1912; took an underground but important part in the Ghadr Conspiracy of '18; was a moving spirit in the disastrous Komagata Maru affair; and since '19 has been employed in 'Smith's' San Francisco bureau on revolutionary propaganda for the East. And," Rollie smiled significantly, "on October 16th, he returned to India through the Khyber Pass, for the express purpose of fomenting and exploiting this Akali unrest. We couldn't

arrest him, of course, because of our eternal difficulty in dealing with 'Smith'—namely that no evidence is ever forthcoming. But you see, Jumbo, Aubrey's idea of forestalling this filthy swine of a sham New Guru contains an element of humour of which even Aubrey himself is unconscious." He turned away and raised his voice ever so little.

"Ohé, Muldoo!"

Without a sound the *chic* lifted, and the old conjuror was salaaming at our feet.

"The Sahib called?"

"Bring me word at three o'clock where our comrade sleeps. Go. *Rakh-sai hai!* We're taking a friend with us, you and I," he explained to me, as Muldoo silently withdrew again. "Don't ask who he is, 'cos I can't tell you—yet! And I hope I never shall be able to."

"And now, old Jumbo," he clapped me on the back, "as the Akali Jatha can't possibly reach Phulki before dawn prayer, and—as Aubrey pointed out—they must first formally impeach the *Mahant* at that ceremony before proceeding to extremes, we needn't start before three—so now we'll turn in and snatch what sleep we can; for—unless I'm much mistaken—we shall need all our nerve when the curtain rises."

For hours, it seemed, I tossed restlessly on my bed, starting up from time to time with the Akali's war cry ringing in my ears, swelled each time to a louder and more frenzied roar, as though from every village in the district other bands had streamed out to join that company of deserters we had last seen vanishing over the blood-red horizon of the plain.

And then pictures of Aubrey Martyr in the midst of it, all mixed up with the world-encompassing tentacles of "Smith," and Rollie's cryptic passages with Bridget Martyr, and his mysterious nameless friend, all combined to make up a sort of ceaseless, feverish nightmare—so that I felt I had hardly got to sleep before I was roused by a lithe Sikh standing by my bed.

"Up, Jumbo—out of your hoggish slumbers," came Rollie's mocking voice. "Your snoring has kept me awake all night. Quick, old lad! here's an Akali outfit."



So used were we to making up in pretty well every caste and creed of Asia for our never-ending succession of adventures, that it was scarcely ten minutes before I joined Rollie in the garage.

"He lies in the house of Ram Narain, the contractor," whispered Muldoo's voice out of the darkness, as, armed with sporting rifles and a change of kit, we climbed into a big Vauxhall.

"Our friend here," said Rollie, pulling up some little way away from Ram Narain's bungalow on the fringe of the sleep-wrapped city, "*may* turn out very useful. Wait here, Jumbo."

Now, I had already seen so many queer things in Mahdipur, that I believed there remained nothing in it, or nothing for Rollie to do, that could still surprise me. Yet I gaped open-mouthed at the proceedings of the next few seconds.

Gliding with the speed and stealth of a panther up the shadow-blotched avenue, to where a sheeted figure slept, native fashion, on the moonlit veranda, Rollie leapt upon it, jammed in a gag, and was running back with an inert lump over his shoulder before I had time to gasp twice.

"There are points about *Mananishad*—this ancient Hindu ju-jitsu, that old Muldoo taught me," he grinned. "Lash him in behind, Jumbo." He heaved into the back of the car the body of what I now saw was a colossal Sikh.

"Is—is this quite a cordial way of treating a *friend*?" I said, with uplifted eyebrows.

"I warned you," he said, letting her out to sixty-five, "that I can't tell even you, old Jumbo—not yet, at any rate. For this," he added in a singularly impressive tone, "is a matter that concerns a man's living soul."

When Rollie spoke like that I knew I might as well try to argue with the Sphinx; and for the rest of our wild drive across the immensity of the spectral, moonlit plain we scarcely spoke—each occupied with our own thoughts of the tremendous fatefulness of the next hour; till at last we saw in the distance a blurry speckle of moving lights, whence came the hoarse murmur of angry peoples

gathering—and above the surge of this tumultuous sea there rose at intervals the familiar cry :

*Sri wah guru ji ka Khalsa !!*

“Phulki !” I exclaimed, filled again with that awful excitement of the zero moment in the old war days. “The barrage lifts, old Rollie !”

As the astute skipper circles round the edge of a cyclone, so we fetched a compass by devious, unused tracks to the official rest house that lay beyond the eastern outskirts of Phulki city.

“Wait a sec., Jumbo,” said Rollie, jumping out of the car and disappearing through the *chic* of a room where a light shone.

But it can’t have been more than two minutes before he was back on the veranda beckoning to me. His voice, when he spoke, was as sorrowful as the dying Hamlet’s, and the look on his face smote me with the chill of a nameless dread. I knew, as I followed him into the bungalow, that I was about to look on some abyss of horror—but I had not guessed how profound.

In the war years we saw dreadful things : shell-shocked, fear-crazy wretches whose twitching lips babbled incoherently of ghastly images that moped and mowled through the chaos of their shattered minds—more awful than the nightmares of a madhouse. But these were lesser things to what I looked upon now in that dreary, mud-walled rest-house. At a table in the middle of the bare room, under the tattered fringe of a moth-eaten punkah, sat, all huddled up, the semblance of a man whom I had some difficulty in recognising as Aubrey Martyr.

His eyes stared out of a haunted face that was as grey and damp as melted tallow fat, and his whole frame twitched and jerked—even as had those poor shell-shocked wrecks of long ago ; and although his lips moved—moved ceaselessly, as if rehearsing a speech—no sound came.

Horried, I shook him roughly by the shoulder. But he only broke into a laugh—an awful cackling laugh.

“My chance,” he muttered crazily, “the Great Chance at last—and I can’t—oh, God ! I can’t . . .”

Sprawling limply over the table, he burst out into a loud blubbering, screaming and yelling about his Chance—the most ghastly picture of gibbering, unholy funk it had ever been my misfortune to witness.

“Lost his nerve at the psychological moment?” I whispered to Rollie, who nodded silently.

“So *that’s* what his wife meant,” I went on, the light breaking, “and what you meant—about the fire at school? You both knew our golden trumpet was only sounding brass?”

But, considering the circumstances, Rollie’s voice was strangely gentle.

“Not quite, Jumbo. He meant every word of it, poor devil. We are looking at God’s most cruel tragedy—a great spirit in a rotten vessel. Come, Aubrey, old boy!” He clapped the nerve-shattered creature on the back, whereat Aubrey started up with a yell—and collapsed again in a quivering, moaning heap.

“I can’t, Rollie; oh, God, I can’t . . .”

And then in a stunning flash it came to me—all that this dreadful spectacle meant. Nothing now could prevent the Akali’s bloody outbreak—since that blubbering tongue of Aubrey’s was the one instrument capable of averting the disaster. I turned to Rollie with a gesture of despair.

“It’s all up with the Punjab now!”

But Rollie calmly shook his head. “In a way, Jumbo, this is lucky,” he whispered, pointing to the nerve-broken man. “Aubrey had taken on a job I don’t believe any white man could have carried through.” He smiled at me in an odd way. “You’ve forgotten our friend, bound and gagged in the back of the car!”

“Who the devil is he?” I cried.

And even in Rollie’s calm voice there was a note of humorous triumph as he replied:

“His Holiness the New Guru of the Passes!”

I suppose I must be unusually thick, and ought to have guessed this from the first; but I simply stared at Rollie, bewildered, while he quickly explained.

“I told you about ‘Smith’s’ publicity agent, who of

late has been so actively advertising the New Guru's advent? This is he—Gurdit Singh, the renegade soldier and agitator. It was his genius of inflammatory eloquence that turned the heads of those poor old Sikhs of the 159th—and thousands of others like them. And when the time was ripe, he intended to declare himself as the New Guru—who is a creature entirely of his own invention—and to put himself at the head of an Akali rebellion. Yes, there's not much that old Muldoo doesn't find out."

Leaving poor Aubrey fast whimpering himself into a state of coma, we dragged Guru Smith out of the car and rushed him through a sequestered mango grove toward the city wall; while over the whole wide shadow-land of the plain, torches bobbed and flared, as Akali bands still poured into the main gateways of the city, that now roared and raged like an infuriated hornets' nest.

"Here's the *Mahant's* private back-entrance," said Rollie, tapping with the butt of his rifle on a small wicket gate tunnelled through the solid eight-foot mud of the wall; which was opened instantly by a spare little man with the features of Julius Cæsar.

"It is then as we feared, Sahib?" he said, comprehending us all with one glance of a pair of gimlet twinkling eyes.

"It is, *Mahant* Jee, but"—Rollie indicated Gurdit Singh with a chuckle—"during the night Muldoo has doubtless spoken to thee concerning this one?"

Inclining his head without a word, the white-robed *Mahant* rapidly led the way to a bare, anchorite cell that was his private chamber; where Rollie proceeded to take prompt and vigorous charge of the situation.

"Comrade Smith," he said grimly, cutting the renegade's bonds, "for once in your filthy life you have almost spoken the truth! Within ten minutes you will in sooth declare yourself as the New Guru of the Passes and the Saviour of the Sikhs!"

"What mean you, Sahib?"

Gurdit Singh, whose magnificent physique and com-

manding presence I could not help admiring, scowled sullenly while Rollie told him in terse and forcible language exactly what he *did* mean. Rapidly he outlined poor Aubrey's brilliant scheme; pointed out with ironical humour that Gurdit Singh should now, after all, have the pleasure of playing the part that he had created for himself—though as revised by Aubrey Martyr and with certain interpolations (here the *Mahant* handed him a copy of the Fifth Guru's manuscript)—and finally, having made all things clear, he bade Gurdit Singh robe himself instantan in the vestments laid out ready for him on a charpoy.

"And," Rollie ended up with a steel-cold ring in his voice, "when you rise to declare yourself the New Guru; to defend the *Mahant*; and to undo the foul mischief you have wrought on the fanatical simplicity of these poor Sikhs—if, Gurdit Singh, you so much as falter for one instant," he laid a hand on my shoulder, "this Sahib and I, who, with our rifles, will be on the *Mahant's* roof not twenty feet above you—this Sahib and I will riddle your black-hearted carcass like a sieve!"

Gurdit Singh, to do him justice, was no coward, but he saw himself inextricably enmeshed in the toils of this deadly trap; and before the incandescent fire of Rollie's righteous anger, his spirit quailed.

"If I did this thing, Sahib," he stammered, "my life would not be safe in India."

"India, as I see it, will be none the worse for that!" Rollie laughed scornfully. "In fact, Mr. Smith Singh, not the least part of our little scheme is that you'll have discredited yourself for ever in those Bolshevick circles of which you were such a shining ornament." He turned to me. "You cover him, Jumbo, till he takes his place on the *gadhi*, beside the *Mahant*—then join me up above."

"This way, Sahib." The *Mahant* showed Rollie a little winding stair up to the flat-topped roof; then, the zest of conflict shining in his eyes, the stout-hearted old man peremptorily motioned Gurdit Singh to follow; whom, to convince of the honourableness of my intentions, I prodded gently forward with my rifle barrel.

There come in life certain episodes—some moment, perhaps, of awful peril, or the eternity-revealing flash of a deathly fear—that are for ever more vividly burned into the mind than the clearest-cut picture on the films. And for us, the long, tense, agonising suspense of the next half hour was one of these.

The huge rectangular courtyard, enclosed by three wings of the temple, and open at the further end, was thronged to its utmost limits; individuals blurred together in one amorphous wild-heaving sea of humanity, all seething and boiling in a fever-ferment of fanatical excitement. The roof-tops of the temple wings themselves were alive with the restless overflow looking, against the first dim grey light of dawn, like ragged, shabby fringes of things.

And as we looked down from what might be called the *Mahant's* private enclosure, at the old *Mahant* himself, sternly facing the multitude, and at Gurdit Singh, seated on the *gadhi* beside him, a sudden roar proclaimed the rising of the Prosecutor.

Old Subadar Rangbir Singh, deputed by the Akalis to move the impeachment, stood up, and in a few blunt soldierly words, impressive in their deep sincerity, indicted *Mahant* Nihal of certain transgressions against the ancient form of Sikhism—transgressions which violated merely the letter of an outworn law, and had no relation to essential morality. And as the old soldier sat down again, there burst forth from the Akalis, with the tempestuous violence of a hurricane, that ear-splitting roar :

“*Sri wah guru ji ka Khalsa!* What hast thou to say, Nihal? Let the *Mahant* speak—let the *Mahant* give answer!”

In the astonished hush that fell when, not the *Mahant*, but Gurdit Singh rose to his feet, I heard the sharp intake of Rollie's breath—saw his finger tighten on the trigger. But the silence was only momentary.

“Let the *Mahant* speak,” they roared with renewed fury, “who art thou to stand in his place?”

It was, I was bound to confess with reluctant admiration, superbly done.

"Behold in me," declaimed the impostor with a gesture of supreme dignity, "the New Guru of the Passes. Hear ye now the word I bring!"

Silence fell again like a stone, awe-struck, profound. The impostor began to speak.

It was soon easy to understand how this man had gained so strong a hold over the Sikhs. As he towered there on the *gadhi*, in the fast-waxing light of day, there was a strange splendour in his presence, an overwhelming passion in the torrent of his speech that would have swayed far more subtle stuff than those simple peasants of the Punjab. This masterpiece of eloquence was, perhaps, the crowning achievement of Gurdit Singh's life.

Formerly he had employed his great gift for gold. Now he was employing it for the one thing dearer to him than gold—his life. He was speaking with the knowledge that within ten yards of his head were two rifles—and behind the rifles, two men who, sure as fate, would use them if he failed. And when he sat down, after undoing his work of the last ten years; after commanding both parties in moving and majestic language, to put the blood-thirst out of their hearts and live henceforth in peace together, the silence remained deeper than before.

And when, amid that great enduring silence, more uncanny, more awe-inspiring than all the tumult and the shouting, those thousands began to steal away soft-footed out of the temple, I turned to Rollie—old Rollie, whose nerve and brain had wrought this miracle of salvation—with a heart too full for words. And he, guessing my thoughts, smiled back.

"That's settled the Gurdwara Question. And now, as Mark Anthony says, 'Jumbo, unarm; the long night's task is done, and we must sleep.'"

The Governor heard our car coming up the drive, and he met us, in pyjamas, in the hall. We had, of course, changed into khaki on the way back, and we could see the old man was fretted to death by the anxieties of the night.

"Where the devil have you been?" he shouted irritably. "Going off at a time like this without leave!"

Rollie grinned.

"Shooting, sir."

"Shooting?" For the first and last time in my experience the Governor, his nerves frayed to tatters, fairly lost his temper with Rollie. "Shooting?" he stormed, "with the fate of India in the balance. Go to your quarters—and consider yourself under arrest."

The screaming injustice of this was more than I could bear. No sooner had the door closed behind Rollie than I blazed out at the old man in the most insubordinate way—told him the whole story as it has been set out here, bating not one jot or tittle of Aubrey Martyr's shame, nor of Rollie's glory. He heard me without remark to the end, a mighty load visibly evaporating off his shoulders, and at the end he said gruffly:

"Go and fetch Rollie."

Bridget Martyr was there when we got back. Her evening dress and the haggard lines in her face told us that she had not been to bed.

"I saw you from my window," she said to Rollie. "Well——?"

And looking her straight in the eyes, Rollie lied—lied as only a great-hearted gentleman can lie.

"He was splendid, Biddy. He's saved the Punjab."

Never shall I forget the light that spread over her face.

"The Punjab—and his own soul! Oh, Rollie, thank God, thank God!"

And as the lips of this freckled, hard-riding, forehand-driving woman moved in grateful prayer that, after all, her man had not failed, and the Governor, violently blowing his nose, turned away to the window, we slipped away to our own quarters.

"Rollie," I gulped chokily, "you deserve——"

"What I'm jolly well going to have, old Jumbo—and that's a very long, very strong whisky and soda."



## THE UNINVITED GUEST

THE mail had just come in and Rollie chucked the "Prattler" across to me.

"Does that remind you of anything, Jumbo?" he asked, with a queer smile, indicating the photo of a happy-looking girl on the page dedicated to "Busy Cupid." And following the direction of his finger I read that the engagement was announced and a marriage would shortly take place between the above Lady Moyra Ffoliot and Captain the Honourable Victor Penn-Hatton.

Staring at the picture I fell into a long reverie, while terrible and haunting memories flooded into my mind; and when at last I spoke, it was softly, almost to myself:

"I'm glad—poor old Penn!"

Rollie nodded. "Hope she's a good 'un," he said; and reaching for his precious old battered volume of Shakespeare, speedily engrossed himself, as was his habit when threatened with emotional stress, in the vagaries of the Bastard Falconbridge—which robust character was, I believe, Rollie's idea of what a proper man should be.

As for me, I tried to read the home papers, but could settle to nothing, so poignant were the memories which that photo, coming like a voice out of the past, set stirring in my brain—and once again that affair of more than a year ago, which had started here in Rollie's quarters where we were even now sitting, passed before my mental vision as vividly and dramatically as a paramount picture on the films.

It had happened during the Mahdipur Christmas Week, which, as everybody knows, is the event of the

North. The long, slow-moving trains had brought in the men from the out-stations—hard, hearty, sun-browned fellows with their bundles of polo sticks, and tennis rackets, and cricket bats, and dogs of known and unknown breeds, all out for a rare old rousing time. Already most of the bungalows in Mahdipur were hospitably overflowing into tents in their compounds; and out at Akalgarh a polo camp had arisen like an exhalation huge, and on the practice ground of a morning balls clicked, and orders were shouted, and the steam from red nostrils mingled thickly with the rising mist, as team and team strove with eleventh hour zeal to fit themselves for mastery in the great Mahdipur Cup Tournament.

Ball-dances there were too, almost every night; but of these the most brilliant was, of course, the State Ball at Government House. Not only would everybody who was anybody in India be there, including most of the Ruling Princes, but on this dazzlingly portentous occasion, a certain Royal Personage, at that time touring the East, would also be present. Great therefore was the eagerness for invitations; for at those State Balls there still glittered a pageantry and glamour that has long since passed from European Courts; but which, in their unchanging hearts, men and women still desire—so long, that is, as they are permitted to participate. And this time the eagerness was all the greater, because the Royal Person was much beloved; and furthermore, because most of the residents of Mahdipur would, perhaps, have little opportunity of meeting Royalty at home. It follows, therefore, since all could not come, that even amid the joyousness of Christmas Week, there were aching hearts.

Rollie and I sat in his office superintending the despatch of positively the last batch of invitation cards—those big pasteboards emblazoned in heavy gold with the Royal Arms, on which His Excellency the Governor commanded the presence of the favoured ones to the State Ball—souvenirs which would be long and proudly cherished by many of the recipients.

“Think of all the pure-souled, high-minded also-rans

who would sell their hopes of heaven for one of these ! ” remarked Rollie with a grin.

Indeed, as potential dispensers of these favours, Rollie and I and all the A.D.C.’s had been snowed under during the last month with three-deep invitations to dinner every night from those who were, as you might say, only on the fringes of society, and suffered, therefore, tortures of yearning suspense. The thought of which suddenly reminded me of an unpleasant mission I had promised to execute.

“ By Jove, Rollie,” I said, “ I’d clean forgotten ! Old Penn is mad keen for you to wangle an invite for the Seraph ! ”

Rollie gave me a curious glance and grunted.

“ Other people’s morals aren’t my funeral, Jumbo—but all the same it looks to me as if Penn’s shouting aloud for trouble.”

“ Oh, I dunno,” I said, “ I daresay it’s harmless enough. You can’t wonder at the Seraph wanting an occasional change of company from that moth-eaten earwig of a husband of hers. It’s damned rough her not being invited to the Ball, Rollie—can’t you work it ? ”

Rollie shook his head. “ Not an earthly, Jumbo. She tackled me herself at the Gymkhana the other day—all sweetness and spaniel eyes—and thought there must surely, *surely* be some mistake, as they were properly on the Government House List, and had as much right to be asked as anyone else. And when I had to explain that there was *no* mistake, she flared up and said we daren’t make a disturbance about it in front of H.R.H. and she was jolly well coming whether she was asked or not.” He slowly lit his pipe and added with a grimace : “ And there is no manner of doubt that she meant it, Jumbo. I wouldn’t have believed that little bit of fluff had so much spirit in her.”

“ Oh, hell ! ” I groaned ; we had had cases of uninvited guests invading these official functions before, and they were not pleasant to deal with. “ Can’t you possibly get her a card, Rollie ? ”

Rollie shook his head.

“ As a matter of fact, I *did* put it up to Her Ex.,”

he said, "but"—a slight twinkle came into his eyes—"Her Ex., as you know, suffers from no amiable weakness in what she conceives to be her social duty. She at once flew into one of her tantrums and said things about the Seraph that positively made me blush. Said she's heard, too, that the Seraph was going about defying Authority, and openly boasting that she was going to the Ball, invited or not invited."

"Phew!" I whistled, mentally picturing a horrid scene, "what if she does?"

"As you may imagine," said Rollie slowly, "Her Ex. is not the sort to let herself be bluffed. She has declared finally and emphatically that if the Seraph *does* come, she will have her flung straight out—scene or no scene."

So that was that.

Personally I felt sorry for the Seraph. She was a little fluffy, childlike thing with big trustful eyes and a soft, gentle little voice, and—what I liked about her most—she went hell-for-leather to hounds and seemed to get a lot of quiet fun out of life. Of course—you know how Indian stations gossip—people said unkind things about her and old Tubby Judson, the Deputy Commissioner, when Mrs. Judson was Home educating their numerous issue; and they were even more venomous about that show with Douglas Shorter of the police. The women especially were always asking, with raised eyebrows, how it was that nobody knew where the creature came from, or who her people were; and insinuated unspeakable things with glances and titters. But this did not cut much ice with the men, since, sad to relate, we knew that the women do not suffer from any excess of charity towards a particularly fair sister who may at any time have been a little indiscreet. And words to this effect I now said to Rollie with considerable warmth—but for once he was surprisingly hard.

"True enough, Jumbo," he answered with his quiet smile, "she's chock full to the finger-tips with magnetism and all that—a most cuddlesome little armful, and I daresay if you and I weren't as busy as we are we should make just as blazing fools of ourselves over her as Penn-Hatton is doing. But"—his jaw set in firm lines—"it's

no use being sloppy—and the brutal fact is that she's an out-and-out bad hat."

I was nettled by his tone, and was beginning to protest hotly on the Seraph's behalf, but he brushed my arguments aside.

"Be that as it may, Jumbo, her morals don't affect the case. Her Ex. has decided that the Seraph shall not come to the Ball, and therefore, as flunkies pro tem., it's our job to see that she does *not* come. Whether Her Ex. is right or wrong, *that* is her show—and discipline is discipline."

I'm afraid I was about to say rude things concerning Her Excellency, whose steely eyes always gave me the shivers, when there was an impatient *rat-tat* on the door, followed by Victor Penn-Hatton—No. 3 of the Royal Dragoon Guards polo team, who were hot favourites for the Cup. He was good to look at, was Penn—a typical young cavalry officer of the best sort, hard as nails, shining-clean, keen as mustard on his work and on sport; with a fiery directness which will one day, after many mistakes, bring him into eminence. . . .

He appeared not to be in a pleasant humour, and ignoring my cheery greeting, turned at once upon Rollie with that flash in his blue eyes which we knew well in tight corners of the polo-fight.

"Look here," he burst out, glaring at Rollie, "it's a damned shame that Mrs. Timmins hasn't had an invite for the State Ball."

Mrs. Timmins, it must be explained, was the Seraph's correct style and title.

Rollie shrugged his shoulders slightly and gave me an expressive glance: intercepting which, Penn shouted angrily: "You're wondering what business this is of mine, aren't you?"

Had Rollie been otherwise constituted he might have planted there a stinging retort; but he was not made that way.

"Penn, old boy," he said quietly, "their Exes. have the responsibility of Royalty at this Ball, and they have finally decided that Mrs. Timmins is not to be asked."

Penn fairly snorted with rage; nor could I help sympa-

thising with him—for it struck me as a monstrous piece of spite to keep out a pretty girl like the Seraph.

"I see," he said, "you believe that pack of filthy lies—Douglas Shorter, and so forth—that the women spread about Mrs. Timmins?"

I made a sort of murmur to show that at any rate I didn't believe it; while Rollie stood silent, tapping his desk with a paper knife.

"Out with it!" shouted Penn, taking a step forward. "She's not asked because your Government House set think she isn't as good as she might be?"

Penn was getting so worked up that I was afraid there would soon be unpleasantness.

"Isn't that the truth?" he stormed.

"Yes," said Rollie simply.

For a moment I thought Penn was going to hit him in the face; but with an effort he pulled himself together.

"I'm going to tell you something," he said more calmly, looking at us each in turn, "which I think will make you try again to get poor little Nellie that invite."

We nodded to him to go ahead, wondering what on earth he was driving at.

"First of all," he began, bringing his fist down on the table with a crash, "I assure you on my word of honour that Mrs. Timmins is one of the saints of the earth, and a foully maligned woman."

"Known her long, Penn?" asked Rollie.

"Well, no, not exactly. In fact I met her for the first time this Christmas Week. But it doesn't take a fellow long to spot a good woman."

A little shadow of concern flitted over Rollie's face at the youngster's hopeless infatuation; and Penn went on in a low, tense voice.

"The poor child has a perfect hell of a life with that husband of hers. He's the meanest little sweep that ever disgraced this earth. Won't allow her a farthing, and—it's too damnable—is always trying to drive her to going about with other fellows, in the hope of blackmailing them. I know you won't believe it, but"—he banged the table defiantly with his fist again—"I swear to you it's true, Rollie—she told me herself."

For my part I could well believe it, for the marriage of the beauteous Seraph to that scrubby little creature had always been a thing beyond my comprehension.

"You see," said Penn, and his voice was now pleading, "it's downright cruelty not to ask her. Be a sportsman, Rollie, and ask Her Ex. again; or let me have a shot at persuading Her Ex.?"

But Rollie shook his head with absolute finality.

"No, Penn—it's all settled. Can't be done nohow."

And he offered no further apology or explanation: whereupon Penn started ramping around the room calling Her Ex. by names that were picturesquely biblical; and I too, in my sympathy for old Penn and the poor little Seraph, forget that if Rollie—the one person she sometimes listened to—had failed to move Her Ex. in the matter of the Seraph, the impetuous intrusion of Penn would only have made things a thousand times worse and most likely thrown her into one of her termagant rages, against which—let it be whispered—we of Government House offered up daily prayers. And as Rollie's point-blank refusal sunk in, Penn completely lost control.

"You definitely refuse?"

Again Rollie nodded.

Penn clenched his fists and took a step towards him. There was murder in his eyes.

"You were a man once, Rollie—but now, by God"—the insult hissed out between his clenched teeth—"you—you—bottle-washing *flunkey*!"

I was afraid they'd be at it before I could spring between. But there is a sort of glamour about Rollie, a strange splendour in his presence, an overmastering power in his eye which other men have not; which caused Penn slowly to drop his fists. And although two small red spots blazed out on Rollie's cheeks, and his breathing quickened, he answered in a tone that was if anything calmer than before.

"Why I took on this job, Penn, is neither here nor there; but having taken it, I do not discuss Their Exes. decisions."

For another tense moment Penn glared at him, and

then snatching up whip and gloves, livid with fury, he flung out his challenge.

"I'm damned if your rotten gang shall persecute that helpless little woman," he yelled. "I'm going to bring her to the Ball myself. And"—he laughed harshly—"I don't somehow fancy that, in the circs, you'll care to turn *me* out."

He was banking, of course, on the Royal Person's well-known and most marked liking for him; but Rollie looked him straight in his furious face.

"If you're a true friend of hers, Penn," he advised, "you'll keep her away—because if she *does* come, as sure as God made little sour apples, she'll be thrown out."

Penn's eyes were fairly blazing now. "Not while I've got the use of my fists," he cried—"and be damned to you!"

And while they stood regarding each other, the one flaming with fiery spirit, the other calm and full of latent power, the tension was relieved by a timid, indeterminate knocking on the door; going to open which, I found Mr. Timmins, the Seraph's lord and master, biting his thumbnail in the passage.

"Oh, come in, do!" I cried, scarcely troubling to conceal my disgust; and the grubby little creature shambled in after me, making nervously hearty noises in the region of the Adam's apple that served him for a chin. He was a desperate-looking freak—with big boiled-gooseberry eyes goggling behind pince-nez; bald head; ragged, scrubby moustache, and a pair of short little stag-kneed legs. His crumpled sack of a suit was stained with cheroot ash and relics of repasts; and he began every remark in a hearty hail-fellow voice that ended in a feeble snigger. And when I remembered that he was the City Coroner and spent his time poking about native corpses, it all seemed so disgusting that I felt positively sick.

Darting him a glance of blistering contempt, and with a curt, defiant nod to Rollie, Penn swung on his heel and stalked out of the room; whereupon Mr. Egbert



Timmins—generally known as the Psisht—fumbled with his *topi* and coughed apologetically.

“I came to see you, gentlemen,” he began with an effort at blustering, “about the State Ball.”

Rollie repressed a weary sigh, and I wished that infernal Ball to Hades, and further.

“It’s like this,” went on Mr. Timmins, “the wife is very disappointed at not receiving an invitation. Now, in my official capacity, and also”—a gleam of pride shot through the goggle eyes—“as 2nd Lieutenant in the Mahdipur Volunteer Rifles, we have the *right* to be asked.”

And he sniggered inanely, as if apologising for his previous temerity.

As for me, I could hardly keep back a smile; for the Psisht’s pride in his Volunteer commission was only equalled by his inefficiency, and the club bar rocked and roared with humorous anecdotes on that account—and, in exalted moments, called each other “Girlie,” in satire of his public endearments to the Seraph. And now he had the cheek to come and *demand* an invitation!

After Rollie had explained with what I thought quite unnecessary kindness to the little swab, that the numbers were filled and that the question could not therefore be re-opened, the Psisht sat for a while with his fingers fretting and trembling around the brim of his broad Cawnpore *topi*—all the bravado gone out of him as from a pricked balloon; and when he spoke again, it was very humbly.

“Major Dennistoun,” he said, with a quaver in his voice, “the wife says we’ve not been asked because I’m—I’m not quite the same as other chaps; socially and so on. I know I hadn’t the same advantages as some. I suppose we weren’t asked because”—he smiled feebly—“I’m not what you’d call a—a gentleman?”

An uncomfortable silence fell, while the shadow of concern deepened on Rollie’s face—and the Psisht went on.

“You needn’t answer, Major; I see it is. I’d set my heart on shaking ’ands, *hands* with the Prince, but no matter. If you don’t ask me, couldn’t you ask the wife?

She'd set her heart on it too, and Captain Penn-Hatton would take her." He plucked at Rollie's sleeve with a tremulous hand. "Do send her a card, old man!"

As he spoke, Penn's words about his sending his wife out with other fellows and then trying to blackmail them, fairly hit me in the eye; and my toe itched to kick the cold-blooded little sweep through the window; and I couldn't for the life of me understand why Rollie looked so upset. Because the Almighty had furnished *him* with a body that was the envy of men and the hunger of women, it never occurred to him to do otherwise than to keep it bright and keen with strict controls, as men do a well-loved gun. And here he was, adamant itself about the poor little Seraph, yet looking at this moth-eaten, flop-bellied little monster like a broody hen at its first chick. Old man, indeed! Infernal cheek!

"I am ver<sup>y</sup> sorry indeed, Timmins," he said after a painful pause, "but I'm afraid nothing can be done now."

For a moment the Psisht blinked hard, and it looked as if he was going to blubber; then, to my disgust, he clutched at Rollie's arm and began to babble hysterically.

"Oh, I say, Major, come, be a sport! Never mind about me, but you must ask Girlie—please, really. If she doesn't go"—his voice sank and he stared wildly at us—"it'll be . . . oh dear, oh dear! !"

He broke off and hid his head in his hands with a shuddering moan.

"Timmins," said Rollie sternly, "what do you mean?"

The little gargoyle's face had gone all clammy with sweat, and he trembled from head to foot. I really thought he was going to have a fit.

"I—I can't tell you," he gulped, in a shaky whisper, "but if Girlie doesn't go to the Ball . . . then God help us all!"

Not another intelligible word would he say. He just crouched there, quivering and gibbering, till at last Rollie, in a kindly fashion, pushed him through the door.

"A clever bit of bluff—a very pretty piece of acting!" I exclaimed indignantly when he had gone, with

fat tears rolling down his cheeks. "From what Penn said it's as clear as daylight, Rollie. The damned little sweep wants Penn to take his wife to the Ball—and then blackmail him!"

But Rollie was genuinely perturbed. "I've never seen a clearer case of livid, crawling funk," he said. "God knows what it's all about, Jumbo, but I can't help feeling that there's some terrible thing hanging over that oddly assorted couple. And," he added, ticking off the last of the invitation cards in the *peon's* book, "Penn's a doubly condemned fool to have gone and mixed himself up in it."

"Old Penn is one of the all-out sort," I said. "Whatever he does, he does heart and soul. I suppose he'll clear off with the Seraph and marry her after the usual unpleasant formalities; and they'll live happily ever after."

"A sound fellow like Penn—and the Seraph!" Rollie shook his head regretfully. "But then, Jumbo, these things have nothing to do with reason—it's just a madness; and there's no accounting for the vagaries of selection."

And when he fell silent, I changed the subject; for I knew he was thinking of another woman, far across the seas, who had proved to him so devastatingly that old, old truth.

Meanwhile, as the Ball drew near, a delicious excitement thrilled through Mahdipur: for in India, where Memsahibs are in the habit of talking with their *ayahs*, all things are known; and during the early ride around Kufri, and on the Race Course, and in the Grand Stand at the Polo, men and women smirked and sniggered to each other that Victor Penn-Hatton had sworn publicly in the bar that he would take the Seraph to the Ball—over his bleeding corpse if need be—and that Her Excellency, who was not given to empty threats, had sworn no less emphatically, that if the Seraph *did* come, she would have her incontinently thrown out.

Whereat the ladies giggled with ecstatic little thrills of anticipation; already, in spirit, holding their pretty thumbs down; while most of the men—certainly the

married ones—though their private sympathies might have been with the Seraph, were sage enough not to express that sympathy in words.

While, therefore, the audience waited eagerly for the curtain to rise, and bets were being laid as to whether Penn and the Seraph would come up to scratch after all, Rollie and I, on whom devolved the handling of this horrid situation, had already made our plan. For we knew without any doubt whatever that Vic Penn-Hatton, though given to strong impulses, was never less good than his word.

The fateful evening came at last.

Long before ten o'clock, lynx-eyed Police Inspectors were shepherding a never-ending stream of cars, past the white lodge of the North Gate, where tall sentries paced and re-paced, and along the palm-bordered avenue that led up to the broad marble steps of Government House. Car after car deposited its load of glittering uniforms and ravishingly raimented ladies, who stepped daintily out on to red carpet between the lances of the Bodyguard—standing on either side of the entrance like splendid, turbaned statues in scarlet and gold—and tripped on, up the steps to where suave A.D.C.'s awaited: who straightway showed the ladies to their cloakroom, and called upon the men to decide between a vermouth or a sherry-and-bitters, while their fair ones tittivated dilatorily, in view of the tremendous occasion. Parties and couples thus put asunder, were once more joined together in the big ante-room just beyond, whence they were conducted by more resplendent A.D.C.'s along a fairway roped off with gorgeous ropes of scarlet and gold, their names ever passed on ahead in low, discreet tones, till at last they found themselves at the entrance of the great white and gilded Ball Room, where Rollie, with the long row of medals clinking on his Hussar tunic, announced their names in a clear voice: and they bowed or curtsied, according to sex, to the fair, slight figure—standing a little in front of Their Excellencies—who warmed each heart with a smile and a hearty hand-clasp.

It was obvious, of course, that Penn would not risk his

intrusion till the Ball was well started : he well knowing that there would be too many eagle-eyes watching out for the Seraph in that long, official queue of presentation. And it was not till the ten tallest men of the Body-guard had roped off, with red and golden ropes, a space in the middle of the Ball Room for the State Lancers ; and all Mahdipur's beauty and chivalry pressed around in that brilliant assembly, with one eye on the Great Ones pacing through their stately measure, and the other cocked eagerly on the entrance, breathlessly waiting for the long-expected scene, that Hubert Vernon, on duty at the main entrance, sent hurried word that the culprits had arrived.

Now whether this was a trick of my over-strained nerves, or whether it was some sort of telepathy, I do not know ; but I could swear that, seeing Rollie and me suddenly leave the room, the assembly *knew* that the dramatic moment had come at last ; for a great sigh went up, and there fell a tension that you could cut with a knife—as, I fancy, when the lions were loosed into the arena—and all those other eyes left as one the State Lancers and turned full-blaze to the big double-doors of the entrance.

As we hurried along the corridor I couldn't help looking back and shaking my fist at the Ball Room ; for the thought of all those smug people licking their lips and gloating to see a poor little woman put to shame fairly made my blood boil—and I hated with a great hatred the work that we had got to do.

"It's all O.K.," said Hubert Vernon, coming to meet us ; "I clicked the door, and Penn's waiting for her outside, having a vermouth with Tony Scarlett." And he added with an embarrassed laugh—for he likewise, and all of us, hated this job. "Poor old Penn ! he told me in so many words that he knew all along Her Ex. wouldn't dare to have them chucked out in the last resort—he being who he is."

Rollie grunted ; for over and above his exalted friendship, Penn was, as all the world knew, the son of a mighty newspaper magnate : and if there was one thing on this revolving earth that Her Ex. feared, it was the

Press. But to do her justice she had stuck in this instance to what she believed her beastly duty in face of angering that Awful Power.

"H'm!" grunted Rollie. "Penn's young. Is the car waiting?"

Hubert said it was waiting, and we hurried on; for the plan we had made was this. Opposite to the ordinary Ladies Cloakroom we had rigged up a second, Cloakroom B—Rollie's office it was normally—appointed as perfectly with pins and powders and feminine what-nots as the real one, even to a number of decoy cloaks and wrappings. The entrance door automatically locked on closing, and another door—over which we had put a printed notice requesting ladies to pass out that way into the ante-room—gave on to the back drive. From this door a red carpet led for a few feet to where Her Excellency's favourite limousine stood waiting in the shadows. And one on each side of this door Rollie and I now flattened ourselves against the wall.

After what seemed like a century the door opened and the Seraph tripped out, looking so sweet and helpless that I loathed myself from the bottom of my heart and longed to take her in my arms and protect her. Seeing that she was not in the gilded ante-room, but, as it were, outside a back door, she gave a little gasp and started back; whereupon Rollie and I—according to plan—each took her by an arm and lifted her into the car—Rollie gently putting his hand over her mouth just in time to stifle her despairing scream for Viccie—as she called Penn.

In a trice the big, silent car had glided out of the grounds, and the Seraph, wrapped in Rollie's blue cavalry cloak, leaned up against my shoulder and sobbed great choking, tearing sobs, till I was terrified that the poor frail little thing would injure herself: and I wretchedly squeezed her hand, swearing under my breath that I would chuck this beastly job and go back to my Regiment to-morrow. Occasional gleams from the festoons of fairy lights that illuminated the roads in honour of the Royal Visitor, revealed Rollie's face, showing me that he was enjoying our drive no more than I:

but, unlike me, he remained silent and aloof, making no pretence of a sympathy which I knew he did not feel.

That drive to the Timmins's bungalow, out beyond the Kutcherry and over the Kufri level crossing, was, though it seemed to me the longest I had ever known, in reality only a few minutes.

And then, once we came in sight of the poor little bungalow, there began to happen such a bewildering series of events, that, for the sake of clarity, I must tell them, not exactly as they unfolded before our eyes, but properly pieced together in the light of subsequent reconstruction.

Firstly then, Penn-Hatton, impatiently kicking up his heels outside Ladies Cloakroom B, began to grow suspicious as the long moments passed, and the Seraph emerged not: and when Hubert Vernon tactlessly shrugged his shoulders in reply to a heated enquiry as to what the hyphenated something hanky-panky we'd been playing on the Seraph, Penn smote that elegant young gentleman a blow which laid him heel-drumming on the crimson carpet; and, shouting vainly for the lady, straightway burst in the door of Cloakroom B—the open exit of which, and the car-tracks outside, at once told him their tale.

So it happened that, even as we turned into the Timmins's compound, Penn was roaring through the gates of Government House in his twenty seven-forty Vauxhall at seventy miles an hour; in chivalrous pursuit, and with red murder in his heart.

And as our limousine drew up under the porch, we saw—Indian bungalows are open through and through—an amazing scene being enacted in the drawing-room—a terrible scene, that all seemed to happen in less than a second, like the fantastic flash of a cinematograph.

Under the pink-shaded lamp a great hulking mountain of a man, who had obviously been drinking hard, sprawled in the best armchair, jeering, and wagging a threatening forefinger at the Psisht: and the miserable little Psisht, quaking in front of him, appeared hypnotised by the bestial leer on the other's face. Suddenly, however, as we stepped on to the veranda, the Psisht

screamed out something at the top of his voice and flew at his visitor's throat. What the Psisht had said we could not catch, but it had a horrible effect upon the big man, stinging him instantly into a maniac fury. With a savage laugh he picked him up, as you might pick up a kitten, and, lifting him above his head, flung him down on the floor with a sickening crash : then, while the Psisht writhed, the brute planted a heel on his chest and began to grind him into the floor, as though he had been an insect.

" Good God," muttered Rollie, springing out of the car, " quick, old lad ! "

In a second we were through the window, and even as the big bully faced around, Rollie's fist met the point of his jaw with the sharp, crisp click of billiard balls meeting ; and the great drunken brute crumpled up like a pole-axed ox and sagged into a heap on the floor.

And then we turned to what remained of the Psisht.

Never beautiful to look at, he was dreadful now. His mouth was flecked with bloody foam ; the gooseberry eyes were fast glazing ; and he didn't seem able to move his legs.

" Lift me—on to—the—sofa, the sofa," he gasped out, as though every word hurt him.

When we had done so, as gently as we could, he suddenly fumbled a revolver from under the cushions—his service revolver as 2nd Lieutenant in the Mahdipur Volunteer Rifles, of which he was so proud—and before we had any idea of what he was going to do, he fired three shots point-blank into the unconscious heap on the floor—the third shot scattering the brains about in a sickly fashion.

" Thank God ! " he sighed happily, sinking back among the cushions, " now my Girlie's safe ! " Then to Rollie in a failing whisper : " Major, you're the only one that was ever decent to me—could I trouble you to give—to give the—wife a message ? "

And Rollie answered with a great gentleness in his voice. " No need—old man. She's come to you herself." Then turning round to where the Seraph clung to Penn near the window—I had not noticed Penn's arrival



amid the turmoil—Rollie motioned her to go to her dying husband : at which she only moaned, and clung the closer to Penn. But there was that in Rollie's face that brooked no denial. "Go to him," he commanded in a low voice; and Penn, gently disengaging her arms, said too : "Yes, go to him, dear."

I looked on as though in a dream. Tenderly the dying man stroked that bowed, golden head, while he gasped out his last message, and Rollie covered the bloody corpse that was staining all the floor.

"Wifie," he panted, "ever since I took you from that brute—he's come—at intervals—threatening to tell about you—if I didn't buy his silence—bleeding me white—" He caressed a yellow curl lovingly. "That's why—Girlie—I've had to—to—keep you short—sometimes. And that's why—when I've known—he—was coming—I've tried to get you out of the way—like to-night—knowing how it would—frighten—you to meet—him—face to face."

I began to understand now, and I found myself suddenly choking. Rollie was looking far away out of the window; and Penn still uncomprehending, stared hard at the broken little creature stroking his wife's head—who sobbed convulsively.

"But now," he went on, and his face broke into the ghastly semblance of a smile, "they'll say—they knew all along that—your poor old freak of a hubbie—was weak-witted—as this murder shows—and—and you're now safe—from all fear of—shame—my Girlie."

Suddenly, at these words, the Seraph started up with a piercing shriek.

"Oh, what wicked, wicked things is he saying? Viccie, oh Viccie, take me away from this cruel slander!" and she tottered away towards Penn, while a terrible spasm of pain contorted the Psisht's face.

But Penn quickly led her to the other sofa and then turned to Rollie.

"In God's name, who was that?" he demanded hoarsely, pointing to the corpse on the floor, and Rollie answered him in a voice pitched low, so that the dying husband should not hear.

"A drunken, derelict actor, Penn—with whom Mrs. Timmins used to live—until her husband, there, found her half-starved in the bazaar, and married her. You see, Penn, it's part of my job to know all the secret things in Mahdipur, and"—he laid his arm on my shoulder—"this is a thing I never even told old Jumbo—out of respect for Timmins."

"Then Nellie—Nellie *lied* about him?" Penn asked very low, pointing to the poor Psisht.

"She lied."

Penn-Hatton was, as I have said, a man of strong passions; and while Rollie spoke his handsome face worked horribly—reflecting the hell of conflicting emotions that seethed within his ardent soul. And while he stood and suffered, the broken man on the sofa still caressed the cushion where his wife's head had rested, and began to speak again—so weakly that we could scarce catch the words.

"Girlie, Sweetheart—I—I know I wasn't a fit husband for you—and—I'm glad—I'm going too. Life's so—so hard for—some of us. But it'll be easier for—you—now. That swine—took—nearly all—but there's enough to get you—home—to mother. Major Dennistoun will—see—to it." A gush of blood checked him for a moment, then with his last strength he struggled to speak again. "God keep you, Girlie—it—it doesn't matter about me."

Blindly now he stretched out an appealing hand. "Good-bye, little wifie?"

The Seraph cowered away to the far end of the room, with her hand before her eyes: and Penn-Hatton, suddenly pushing past me, sank on one knee beside the sofa and carried the Psisht's grubby hand to his lips, even as in days gone by nobles were wont to salute their liege. And the Psisht, thinking it was his wife's lips that kissed him at the last, gave one happy sigh, and rendered up the spirit that it had so amused Mahdipur to mock.

"My God!" groaned Penn, "and I thought I knew how to love!"

As Rollie and I rode at a walk around Kufri Point, a

few evenings later, a figure on horseback stared past us with unseeing eyes—a figure suddenly so aged and haggard that we scarcely recognised it as Penn—stared past us, far and far out to sea, to where the lights of the mail boat were fading into that dim mist of sea and sky that was like the threshold of eternity.

We rode on silently, filled with heavy thoughts; for in this sad old world there is no sight so pitiful as the glimpse of a naked heart that is saying farewell for ever.

## THE EYE OF FIRE

It was strange that the first seed of love that ever took root in my heart should have sprung there from the tragedy of the Eye of Fire—one of the grimmest of the many grim adventures in which, at one time and another, Rollie and I were involved. But then, as the philosophers have said, Life is a strange affair.

Gilbert Sharde, the brilliant young archæologist who was stopping at Government House on his way up to the excavations at Taxila, had been telling us yarns till far into the night. And it may have been that these yarns—gruesome yarns, most of them, about the terror and mystery of the East, and those dread abysses of evil and superstition which, though no white man has ever yet fathomed, still lie beneath its surface—it may have been that these yarns were running in my head, for I suddenly found myself lying stark awake with the hair prickling on my scalp; and I could have sworn that I'd heard a low cry of terror from the next room—the room where Glory van Tuyl was sleeping.

In three bounds I was out of bed, across the passage, and into Rollie's room. He was, of course—for I don't believe that amazing friend of mine ever slept—propped up on the pillows, reading his beloved Will Shakespeare; and he regarded my wild, pyjamaed entrance as calmly as if I'd been the *bearer* bringing in *chota haziri*.

"Good God, Rollie, didn't you hear it?" I shouted, and hardly were the first words of explanation out of my mouth before he had leapt from his bed too—for in India there are times when every second is of vital value—and in an instant we were hammering on Glory's door. And as we knocked and knocked again, and no answer

came, fear clutched at my heart with icy fingers. If anyone had told me three days before that I should ever have felt that way about a girl I should have told him straight that he was dotty; and yet, when Rollie put his shoulder to the door, I fretted in an agony of foolish perturbation.

"We—we can't burst into her room like this," I groaned.

The idea somehow, it is difficult to explain, seemed like a sort of sacrilege.

Old Rollie did not answer, but his eyes flashed me a message of wonderful sympathy, which said all at once that, although perfectly understanding my feelings, there were occasions when the very proper prejudice against young men entering a maiden's room in pyjamas must give way to greater issues.

As the lock gave way with a crash and we clicked on the light, I was nearly choked by a rush of tenderness and pity. Glory, dear, gay, fragile little Glory, with one slender arm thrown across the coverlet, and her lovely head pillowed in an aureole of silky hair, lay white and still as death, like a picture of the Sleeping Beauty. And then, while I stood paralysed by an awful thought which I dared not put into words, her eyes slowly opened—big, violet eyes, clouded by the shadow of a great fear which melted into unspeakable relief when they lighted upon us.

"Oh, thank heavens you've come!" she murmured weakly; and, revived by the smelling-salts from her dressing-table, she told us in a terrified whisper what it was that had made her utter the cry that had startled me from my slumbers.

"It must have been a nightmare," she said, trembling all over; "it's too horrible to be true. I woke up suddenly"—she paused again and sniffed at the cut-glass bottle—"smelling that queer Indian smell you get in the temples, and with the feeling that somebody was in the room. And when I screwed up courage to open my eyes, I saw, just there"—she pointed to the white-panelled wall just over the foot of her bed—"a sort of ghostly figure, with a pale, phosphorescent light playing

over it, and its face was like the face of the old priest down at the shrine behind the Bodyguard Lines."

She shuddered violently, and the shadow of fear stole again into her eyes. "Its eyes shone like an animal's in the dark, and for ages it seemed to look through me—and then it slowly raised one arm and pointed to the wall just there. Oh, merciful heavens! what's that?"

She sat bolt upright with a little scream, pointing towards the opposite wall.

"Good God!" I exclaimed involuntarily, for following the direction of her petrified gaze, our eyes fell on a fragment of faded parchment, such as they use in the temples for transcription of the Vedantic Text, affixed to the wall; and the writing on it was thick and smeary, in a substance of blood-like hue.

Glory's voice shook pitifully when she broke the awed silence.

"It wasn't a nightmare then!" She clutched my arm wildly so that it thrilled right up into the very core of my being. "Oh, Jumbo," she moaned, "what does it mean?"

I had no idea whatever. A heavy presentiment of evil, evil mysterious and unknown, weighed down on me like lead; and I could only repeat the question—in a voice I tried my best to keep unconcerned—to Rollie, who had unpinned the parchment and was poring over it.

"It's in a script I don't know," he said slowly, shaking his head. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Miss van Tuyl, that you should have been frightened by this nonsense while a guest in Government House. "It was like Rollie, always to be thinking of the sacred obligations of Government House, even at a moment like this, and he added with his sudden winning smile: "But if you could manage to stay on quietly in your room—without letting this thing be known—trusting us to see that you are protected, our chances of catching your mysterious visitor——"

"Steady on, Rollie," I burst out. "Miss van Tuyl must go to Her Excellency at once. You can't possibly expect her to stay on alone in this horror-haunted room!"

But though her lips trembled, Glory looked at me with a brave smile.

"No, Jumbo, Major Dennistoun is right. It's more important than my feelings to solve this mystery, and I shall feel quite happy here if I know you two are up and watching in the next room, ready to come at once if I knock on the wall."

And though I implored her not to listen to Rollie and his exaggerated sense of duty, she stuck to her decision like the little brick she was.

"Can't make head or tail of it," said Rollie, shaking his head again over the parchment in my room after we had posted a special cordon around the veranda. Nor could that inexhaustible mine of dark and secret knowledge, old Muldoo, the conjuror, who appeared silently through the *chic* while we examined the cuneiform characters against the light—old Muldoo, whom Rollie appeared to have a mysterious power of summoning from the vasty deep in vital moments such as these, like Prospero, or whoever it was, in his blessed old Shakespeare.

"Nay, Sahib," said the conjuror, wagging his head, "this is a writing out of the old, old past. Were it put into language, then, God knows, but old Muldoo might interpret . . ."

And then it occurred to me—a sudden and brilliant brain-wave.

"Gilbert Sharde!" I cried, clapping Rollie on the back.

"He took a double first in Hebrew and all that sort of thing!"

"By gad, you've said it, Jumbo!" Rollie was out of the room in a flash.

Gilbert appeared in pyjamas and an eye-glass, yawning a little, but wonderfully good-natured about being routed out of his beauty sleep. He was a good-looking, witty, high-spirited sort of fellow—quite the last person you would have expected to be an eminent archæologist—and had become very popular during the short time he had been staying at Government House.

"Is this one of your rude jokes, soldier-men?" he

said, eyeing us a trifle suspiciously, "because, if so——"

But the humour faded out of his face when Rollie handed him the parchment and briefly related its circumstance.

"Can you make it out?" I asked anxiously, no longer able to bear the strain, as he pored over the portentous slip, his face growing graver and graver, in a silence broken only by our laboured breathing; and when at last Gilbert spoke, it was curtly to demand pencil and paper.

"The parchment," he said, after he had written for a few poignant moments, "is in the original Sanskrit of the Hindu Scriptures. And this"—he handed his own sheet of paper to Rollie—"is as exact a translation as I am capable of making."

Even if Glory had been, well, just any other girl, I think my feelings would still have been well-nigh overwhelming when Rollie, in a calm, dispassionate voice, read out the sinister edict:

"Maid from over the seas, if thou wouldst save thy body and thy soul from death and that which is worse than death, go thou alone before the rise of sun and replace reverently before Shiva's Shrine the Eye of Fire that was reft from Him in the past. Fail, and the vengeance of Shiva is swift and terrible."

There was something in the quiet, even way in which Rollie read those words that made them sound in my ears like the voice of Doom—like a dread echo from the dark, primeval abysses of the past, that, in India, we ever feel instinctively beneath our feet. And although Rollie next moment spoke almost lightly, I, who knew him so well, could tell that even *he* was shaken, when he asked Gilbert with a laugh if he thought it was a bit of cheap hocus-pocus to rob Miss van Tuyl of her famous diamond.

But Gilbert, for such a brilliant and incessant talker, was strangely silent. He brooded long over the writing before he answered Rollie's question. And then it was to ask quietly:

"You know the legend of Shiva's Eye of Fire, I suppose?"



And when we shook our heads, he laughed in his good-natured way.

"Oh, you polo-playing Indian soldier-men! I've been in India exactly five days, and I seem to know more about it than you do. The legend of the Eye of Fire——"

"Aye, Sahib, *that* story is well known!"

Old Muldoo's voice came from where he squatted on the floor, vibrant with a deep note of superstition.

"Ah, you know it, old Cinquevalli?" Gilbert smiled. "Perhaps you'll tell the Sahibs, then. It will sound more realistic in the vernacular."

"It was long ago, Sahibs," began Muldoo, nervously clearing his throat, "in the days of Mahmoud of Ghuzni. . . ." And the old Hindu, with a queer fanatical light in his eyes, told us how the Mahomedan invader had violated the sanctuary of Somnath, and, smiting open with his own battle-axe the image of Shiva, had reft from it its single eye—the great Eye of Fire, which, men said, dispensed a boundless virtue while it remained seated in the forehead of its proper god, but which had become transformed by this dire sacrilege into an agent of fabulous malignity, spreading horror and ruin in its path.

From that day, he told us, the priesthood had kept track of its transit through the years—through Samarkhand and Turkestan, Muscovy and the land of the Franks, even unto the Great New Country beyond the Western Sea. And—old Muldoo's voice quavered oddly as he told us this—it had recently been prophesied by the Tirthankers that the Eye of Fire should be borne back to Lokomanya by a white maiden from the West.

"You don't really believe," Rollie asked, when Muldoo had finished his story, "that Miss van Tuyl's diamond can be connected with this legend?"

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "To us white men it all sounds like a bit of phantasmagorical mumbo-jumberry. But," he added, with impressive gravity, "from the Indian point of view, this fair Amurrican globe-trotter and her diamond do seem to coincide remarkably with the legend."

While he spoke there came to my mind, with a sickening sense of dread, something Glory had told me only that evening.

"It certainly is a curious coincidence," I said to them anxiously. "Miss van Tuyt's father bought the diamond from a friend whose family had been dogged by the most mysterious and persistent fatalities ever since it had been in their possession."

"Ah!" exclaimed Gilbert; then he suddenly started and stared at us, muttering almost to himself. "Great Scott, how strange! I'd never thought of that!" And when we asked him *what* was strange he glanced significantly at Muldoo.

"You can speak out," said Rollie, "he's one of us."

"Oh, all right. Now what do you make of this? The King of Somnath at the time when Mahmoud despoiled the Eye of Fire was Prithvi Raj. And"—Gilbert's voice shook with suppressed excitement—"there is staying in Government House at this very moment the direct descendant and namesake of that illustrious sovereign!"

"Prithvi Raj of Las Khelas?" I ejaculated, not quite catching his drift.

Gilbert nodded. But when Rollie asked him very gravely if he seriously meant to suggest that Prithvi Raj was mixed up in that burglarious trick, I couldn't help bursting out.

"Ridiculous, my dear fellow! Why, there's no better sportsman in India than Prithvi Raj!"

Yet even as the words left my lips, I remembered with a sudden chill the curious way Prithvi Raj had been looking at Glory of late. And Gilbert's next words in no way reassured me.

"I suggest nothing," he said. "Actually, I don't know India as you fellows do. But"—he shook his head in a doubtful manner—"after my researches in Hindu mysticism there is nothing that might happen in India that could surprise me."

Rollie looked at his watch. It still wanted half an hour to the time of the mandate on the parchment.

"You may be right, Gilbert," he said. "This thing

*may* be connected with the dim and hidden mysteries of the past, but to me it smacks more of the light-fingered agents of the present. And acting on that assumption, Jumbo and I will depart forthwith and deposit an empty jewel-case on the shrine—and await results.” He turned to Gilbert. “You wait here, old chap, in case Miss van Tuyl knocks.” And to me: “Come on, Jumbo!”

It was the time of heaviest, velvety Indian darkness, just before the first glimmer of false dawn, when Rollie and I, khaki-clad and with our guns ready to hand, crept around to the crude little shrine of Shiva in the grove just beneath the Bodyguard Lines. The shrine itself was merely a rude stump of phallic stone, smeared with red paint and the grime and grease of countless obliterated candles, and in front of it burned a little earthenware lamp.

Rollie deftly lobbed an empty jewel-case beside the lamp, then, crouching behind the bole of a twisty *peepul*, we waited expectantly—waited and waited, till a sudden macabre outburst of conch-braying and tom-toms from the city proclaimed the hour of morning prayer.

A twig snapped. A white-robed figure glided silently through the grove and stopped before the shrine of Shiva. For a moment it stood upright before the image, arms upraised, a tall, slight statue of supreme nobility and grace, then, stooping swiftly, picked up the jewel-case. As it rose again I gasped audibly, for the light of the little lamp, flickering over its face, revealed the fine, delicately-chiselled features of Prithvi Raj.

Rollie gripped my arm in a vice of steel. Scarce daring to breathe, we watched the Prince open the jewel-case and toss it away with an exclamation of disgust. Then, scholar of Trinity, Cambridge, he prostrated himself before that painted bit of stone, murmuring some weird-sounding incantation, and, a moment later, glided again like a spectre from the grove.

The dawn, now swiftly spreading in shafts of vivid crimson across the eastern sky, lit up Rollie’s troubled face. Only once before in our career of many adventures could I remember having seen him look so distressed.

"Jumbo, this is most devilish awkward," he whispered. "You know Prithvi Raj is his father's ambassador here over the boundary dispute between him and Shankamar—a very touchy question of international importance. At all costs he mustn't be offended. The only thing now is to tell Miss van Tuyl the whole affair and get her to let us lock up her diamond in the safe."

I could not at once take in the full significance of what we had just seen. "Prithvi Raj!" I muttered, "a cricket Blue. It can't be possible!"

For answer Rollie pointed to the red-smeared bit of stone.

"You saw him bowing down to that. With the East you never know, and we can't afford to take risks. We'll wait five minutes and make a wide detour back."

Gilbert's face, when we had regained my room, was ghastly to behold. Even before he had uttered a word, we were conscious of calamity.

"Good Lord, what's up?" I cried, scared to death almost by his pallid countenance, lest something had happened to Glory.

"What's up?" he repeated in a state of hectic agitation. "What's up? *Only* that while you've been wild-goose chasing, the diamond has been stolen!"

"Stolen! How?" shouted Rollie; and Glory, entering at this moment, fully dressed and very pale, answered for herself.

"A few minutes ago," she told us in tremulous tones, "I got a message on my bed-telephone saying Her Excellency wanted me to go up to *chota haziri* with her at once. I went—and found she hadn't even been called. And when I got back I saw the false lining of my dressing case had been ripped open and the diamond gone!"

The diamond gone! We stared blankly at each other; and then Rollie asked if any other jewellery had been taken. "Nothing else," Glory told him, "only the big diamond!"

Whereupon Rollie turned to Gilbert, his face reflecting a little of that political disquietude that he knew must arise from this extraordinary situation. "It looks as if you're right about Prithvi Raj, Gilbert."

"He *did* turn up at the shrine, then?" Gilbert was strangely excited.

"Yes." Rollie briefly recounted the incidents of our vigil in the grove, to which Gilbert listened with profound attention, and, at the end, began to speak in the manner of a man thinking aloud.

"Prithvi Raj would certainly have returned from the grove by the back veranda," he ruminated. "He would pass Miss van Tuyl's room, and might have seen through the *chic* that it was empty. Why," he cried suddenly, "the whole thing's as clear as crystal! When Prithvi Raj saw his bogey business had failed, he, or an accomplice, 'phoned that decoy message to Miss van Tuyl, and as soon as she left the room, lifted the diamond! By Jove, though"—he turned to Rollie with a wry expression—"this is going to put Government in a pretty kettle of fish over the boundary negotiations. It's not done in the best diplomatic circles to arrest Serene High Plenipotentiaries for common felony!"

"What *does* he mean?" Glory asked, perturbed by these suggestions of vague, tremendous contingencies looming up behind the loss of her stone. And very frankly and very gently Rollie told her—told her the whole story as it has been set out here, not minimising, on the one hand, the awesome potentialities that might lie in the legend, nor, on the other, the far-reaching importance of bringing the boundary negotiations to a successful conclusion. "If you can trust me a little farther," he said, patting her tremulous hand, "I believe I may be able to recover your diamond without the grave consequences of a public scandal."

"How, Rollie?" I interpolated, painfully divided in my mind between solicitude for Glory and the exigencies of public duty.

Rollie thoughtfully lit a cigarette. "A man like Prithvi Raj," he said at last, "can only have stolen this jewel for religious motives—motives mysterious and incomprehensible to us. It is certain, then, that he will try to get it away at once to his high priest, or someone of that sort. So"—he turned to Glory again—"we have a pretty efficient secret service here, and I shall

have every movement of his and his suite closely and invisibly watched."

"Why, of course I'll trust you, Major Dennistoun," Glory answered at once. "I guess I don't want to lose my diamond, but I see the fix you're in."

"You little sportsman, Glory!" I began enthusiastically, when I was interrupted by the entry of her bearer, carrying a large envelope on a salver.

"Urgent *chit*, Miss Sahib," he announced, salaaming, "Prince Prithvi Raj waiting answer."

We looked at one another in astonished silence, and Glory flushed angrily as she read.

"Look at this!" she cried, handing me the heavily gilt-crested note, which I proceeded to read aloud.

"MY DEAR MISS VAN TUYL,

"There is a very urgent and private matter which I wish to discuss with you. My time here is so filled that I never have the opportunity of seeing you alone. May I therefore ask you most graciously to favour me with the pleasure of an interview in the Jasmine Arbour this evening at 7.30 o'clock, when I shall impart the matter in question?"

"Believe me, my dear Miss van Tuyl,

"Your most devoted Servant,

"PRITHVI RAJ."

"Well, of all the cool, brazen-fronted cheek!" I began furiously, but Rollie stopped me.

"Prithvi Raj is a fine fellow in many ways," he said, "and it's just possible that he may want to make some explanation of his ungallant conduct in appropriating your diamond, Miss van Tuyl. I think you ought to go—if," he added, very kindly, "the idea does not frighten you?"

Glory sprang up with flashing eyes.

"Frighten me?" she cried contemptuously. "I guess it takes more than one of your old Indian Rajahs to frighten a New York girl!"

But if Glory wasn't frightened, I was. I felt inexplicably deep down in my mind that some dark and

mysterious danger over-shadowed this wonderfully plucky little girl, who had of late come to be always in my inmost thoughts.

"When the service of the Empire is at stake, Rollie," I said warmly, "you wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice your own mother! I forbid Glory to go!"

I must say that Glory seemed a little wanting in gratitude. She swung round on me, her eyes fairly blazing.

"When I require *your* permission, I shall ask for it, Captain Carstairs!" she cried, stamping her foot.

Captain Carstairs! Phew! My jaw dropped, and I stared in amazement at this little fury, whom up till that moment I had regarded as the quintessence of everything that is sweetly feminine and adorable, while she added rapidly to Rollie.

"Of course I'll go, Major Dennistoun. I wouldn't be worth my salt if I didn't!"

"Half a mo, though," I put in a little sulkily but firmly, "is there anything"—I looked at Gilbert, who during this somewhat heated interlude had remained thoughtfully silent—"is there anything in your old Hindu mythology business that suggests Miss van Tuyl might come to any *harm*—if she kept this appointment?"

Gilbert cogitated deeply for some moments while we anxiously awaited his reply.

"No," he said at last, thoughtfully shaking his head, "I don't think there is." He looked, I thought, in an odd manner at Glory. "And I'm inclined to agree with Rollie that in the circumstances Miss van Tuyl should go, if——"

"I've said I *am* going!" said Glory with absolute finality, darting an angry glance at me, while Rollie's eyes once again signalled that message of rare and wonderful understanding—the message of a man who had loved and suffered himself, to the comrade whose tribulation he perfectly comprehended.

"There are times," he said, "when convention must give way to bigger things. You and I, old Jumbo,"—his voice was wonderfully sympathetic—"will watch

from the rhododendron clump to see that no harm befalls Miss van Tuyl."

So thus it was decided. And while Glory wrote, accepting Prince Prithvi Raj's invitation, Rollie and I went out to make the arrangements by which every movement of his suite should be watched by expert, unseen eyes.

The winter's day had red-dyed the horizon of the misty sea when Rollie and I took up our hiding in the thick clump of shrub, our fingers ready to the trigger for instant action.

A little before the appointed time the lithe figure of Prithvi Raj came striding with the sinuous grace of a panther into the summer-house. Darkness—the sudden, starry, Indian darkness—had fallen, and once he was inside the arbour we could only discern a vague and shadowy outline, from which gleamed a pair of eyes, uncannily, inhumanly bright.

An instant later and my grip tightened on the trigger as a slim figure in shimmery dinner frock glided across the lawn, and there surged up in me such a tumult of emotion as, until a day or two before, I had believed existed only in the fevered imaginations of the romantic novelists.

As Glory flitted up into the summer-house, Prithvi Raj bent low over her hand.

"Good evening, Prince!" we heard her say in a voice so calm and steady that it made me, if possible, admire her more than ever. "You see I've come in answer to your letter."

For a moment there was silence, tense and pregnant, ruffled only by the infinite murmurs of an Indian night, and then the Prince began to speak.

"Lady," he said in his deep voice, "you are kind. My time here is so occupied with state affairs that I never have an opportunity to speak to you alone. Yet there is one thing that I must say before I leave." His voice suddenly became very gentle. "May I say it now?"

"Why, sure, Prince. What is it?"



Again there was a long, poignant silence, before he spoke again.

"Lady," he began at last, his eyes flashing strangely in the gloom, "the fair peoples of your West look with contempt on our race. They despise us as barbarians still—no, please, do not interrupt—yet, if you troubled to read our ancient books you would find in them a chivalry older far than yours, and as lofty in sacrifice and knightliness. A Rajput's honour, lady, is a tradition that laughs at death. But words are so pale to tell the passion that is raging in my soul. Oh, lady, put a sword in my hand and match me against a score of foes, and my arm should show you what my halting tongue is not able to express."

I heard the sharp intake of Rollie's breath and Glory's deep gasp before she spoke again.

"What—what do you mean, Prince?" she faltered.

Again he bowed low over her hand and spoke in a voice that pulsed electrically through the surcharged air.

"Sweet lady, that you will be my queen?"

All nature, even the tiny sounds of night, were hushed in the silence that followed—all hushed, except the low, insistent throbbing of a tomtom from Shiva's grove, which, to my overstrained fancy, appeared to weave a dread, hypnotic background to that incredible scene.

"Prince," began Glory at last, in a voice I hardly recognised as hers, "I guess you're a gentleman—a whiter man than most. But I—forgive me—I came because I thought you might—you might know something about my diamond!" She ended the sentence breathlessly, ashamed.

"What diamond, lady?" His deep tones were calm and passionless now.

Nervously, in extreme agitation, we heard her tell him the story of the theft, and when it was ended he spoke calmly, the polished, inscrutable courtier once more.

"So that was why you came, lady?"

Glory's voice trembled with a great pity—and a formless dread.

"Yes, Prince, I'm sorry. Will you give me your arm back now? It's just on dinner time?"

But he had drawn away from her. "Please excuse me, lady, I will follow."

With an impulsive gesture of remorse, she turned and sped away, out of the dark shadow of the whispering palms, towards Government House, towards the blaze of light and colour that symbolized for her things known and understood; while Prince Prithvi Raj stood watching, motionless on the steps. And when she had flitted out of sight he turned suddenly and addressed the rhododendron clump in stern tones.

"Kindly come out, gentlemen."

There have, of course, been many times in my life when I have felt particularly mean and small, but never had I known such overpowering humiliation as at this moment. And when we had come shamefacedly out, the Prince regarded us impassively, without surprise or any kind of emotion.

"Do you think that I," he said, looking Rollie straight in the face, "I who have tracked every beast of the jungle to its lair—do you think that I did not see you watching while I prayed yonder in the grove? Do you think I did not see you listening here? Among my people"—he drew himself up haughtily—"such conduct has an ugly name. Will you kindly explain why you have behaved in this fashion to a stranger in your midst?"

If he has taken the diamond, I thought to myself, he's certainly carrying it off in a most masterly manner, and when Rollie's answer came, it sounded even in my ears, utterly lame and inadequate to so desperate a situation.

"Your Highness," he said gravely, "I can only ask you to believe that we have acted in this seemingly dishonourable fashion in the hope of serving our country and yours." Then to me, as the Prince strode away with a contemptuous curl of the lip, "that's put the lid on the boundary negotiations, Jumbo. I'd have given my commission to have prevented this!"

We had hardly time to do a quick change into evening kit before the guests began to arrive for the State Banquet in honour of Prince Prithvi Raj's mission, and the

Governor, who had already shaken hands with the glitteringly uniformed and frocked assembly, was beginning to fret.

"He's usually so punctual," he fumed under his breath to the A.D.C.-in-waiting. "Tim, go and see what's the delay."

But before the A.D.C. had reached the door, a member of the Prince's retinue arrived.

"Your Excellency," he announced, "His Highness begs to be excused from dinner. He will attend afterwards in the ball-room."

As the procession, marshalled in rigid order of precedence, trooped into the State dining-hall, Gilbert Sharde threaded his way through the crush to me.

"Any luck, Jumbo?" he whispered.

"Damn all!" I whispered gloomily, busied in piloting lost sheep to their appointed places.

And then, when we were all seated, and I looked down the table, over all the long dazzling medley and glitter of this formal function, my eyes rested on Glory, pale as a lovely lily, absent, *distracted*, all her sparkle gone, and, next to her, Gilbert Sharde, talking away with his usual brilliant animation; and then on Rollie—and I started involuntarily.

The incident of the summer-house, I realised instantly, was not enough to have brought that terrible expression to his face, for there blazed right out of his steel-grey eyes the look of a man who has just beheld face to face some awful thing beyond the human bourne. I knew surely that, since we had parted to dress for dinner, developments had taken place, and that we were on the verge of some tremendous eventuality; and fearing that it might bode ill for Glory, the champagne went flat in my mouth, and I longed as I had never done before for that interminable banquet to end.

At last, when we had joined the ladies, and all looked with increasing uneasiness at the empty chair of state beside the Governor, the great double doors at the end of the ball-room were thrown open, and a herald sonorously proclaimed the style and titles of the Prince.

The uneasiness of the assembly turned to a thrill of

apprehension when Prithvi Raj, instead of advancing to his seat of honour, halted a few paces inside the room and stood fronting the dais. The whole company instantly rose, all eyes riveted on the picturesque handsome figure in long blue robes of state, its silken turban clasped in front with a fabulous gem and shimmering aigrette that added stature to his slender height. But brighter than the breast-plate of sparkling diamonds or the looped festoons of pearls that streamed like prisoned moonbeams from his shoulders, were his eyes, flashing with volcanic fire. Haughtily, while the startled on-lookers held their breath, he faced the Governor.

"Your Excellency," he began, his nostrils dilating, "my great father sent me here in the warm hope that our negotiations should be brought to a satisfactory conclusion, but"—his voice vibrated with a terrible anger—"what will my father and our people say when I return to-morrow, shamed—shamed so low!"

An audible gasp went up from the assembly. The Governor's high-nosed face eloquently expressed his profound amazement.

"Your Highness," he protested, "I assure you I am utterly at a loss to understand your meaning!"

Unheeding, the Prince continued.

"Although I am the guest of your Government, my most private actions are spied upon. Concealed agents watch outside my apartments. Officers of your staff dog my footsteps. At first, though I wondered, I made no sign, for there is nothing in my heart that all the world may not see. Then suddenly the meaning was made clear. It is because——"

"Such precautions," interrupted the Governor, palpably relieved, "have doubtless been taken to ensure Your Highness's safety during your sojourn here."

"No!" cried the Prince with a fiery gesture. "It is because you believe that I—I, Prithvi Raj, am a thief!"

No words can describe the dismay that was depicted in every face, and the Governor fretted in inexpressible distress.

"Your Highness!" he exclaimed helplessly, while Gilbert Sharde whispered in my ear. "What acting!"

What sublime bluff! 'Pon my soul, he deserves to get away with the diamond!"

But I scarcely heard him, so astounded was I by the next development in this drama, for while the dumbfounded Governor, convinced that Prithvi Raj had gone out of his mind, was wondering what to do, Glory—vivid, sparkling little Glory—stepped out of the crush. As she stood for a moment in the open space, between the dais and the Prince, a beautiful, girlish figure, struggling visibly to overcome her agitation, the murmur of voices sank to deathly silence, and then, amid the breathless hush, she began to speak in low, tremulous tones.

"What His Highness says is unfortunately too true, Your Excellency. I believed that my diamond had been stolen by some person who had gained admittance to Government House by impersonating Prince Prithvi Raj, and it was in this error that your officers have unwittingly annoyed the real Prince."

And while the onlookers gaped in open-mouthed bewilderment, I heard Rollie mutter to himself. "Oh, noble little liar!"

"Your famous diamond stolen—here?" faltered the Governor, floundering deeper and deeper in the slough of perplexity. "Why—why am I not informed of these things?"

"I thought it had, Lord Bellington," Glory went on, "but just as I was going down to dinner, my maid found it in a fold of my dress."

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated Gilbert in a hoarse whisper, "what's her game?"

But I could only shake my head. The whole thing was far beyond me. And Glory turned to the Prince, who stood regarding her, grave and impassive as the Sphinx.

"This," she continued with an impulsive gesture, "is the explanation of what you naturally took for outrageous insults. Long, long ago"—she turned and addressed the still dumbfounded spectators—"they say a terrible curse was laid on that diamond. As a modern American I laughed at such old-world stuff, but now"

—her voice took on a heart-stirring note—"I see that it has indeed nearly brought untold misery upon two whole races. To-morrow I shall fling it far into the sea. Meanwhile, Prince"—she stretched out a slender hand towards him in an irresistible gesture of appeal—"right here in public I beg you to accept my humble apology. You will not surely, for the sake of one foolish woman's stupidity, break off the negotiations which may affect the happiness of millions?"

I pinched myself to see if I was really awake, not dreaming some extraordinary nightmare, and after a long, torturing pause, while everybody stood frozen rigid, as in a *tableau*, with eyes straining on the Prince, he spoke in a voice that was strangely gentle.

"Lady, to-night you have taught me the pettiness of selfish pride. When you so humbly plead so high a cause"—he bowed low with regal dignity—"how can I refuse?"

"Oh, wonderful girl!" Rollie murmured enthusiastically in my ear. "She shall have her diamond back within the hour."

And as the Prince retired and the babel of suppressed excitement burst forth again, he took Gilbert and me each by an arm and led us off to Gilbert's room.

"Now, why in the name of all that's holy," cried Gilbert as the door closed behind us, "is she screening Prithvi Raj?"

"Because," said Rollie—and there was that in his voice that made me stare at him—"because she's one in a thousand, and would rather lose her diamond than risk a war."

Gilbert smiled a little cynically. His faith in altruism was not so high.

"Well, whatever the motive," he said with a laugh, "she has saved a public scandal."

"She has." Rollie's voice was cold and hard. "And I think she deserves her diamond back." He turned and quietly locked the door. "I don't wish to appear melodramatic, Sharde, and I don't mind telling you that this is one of the worst moments of my life, but will you kindly give me the diamond at once?"

"I say, Rollie, steady on!" I exclaimed, staring from one to the other, thunderstruck, while Gilbert put a soothing arm on Rollie's shoulder.

"My dear fellow," he said with great concern, "the strain of this affair has upset your nerves!"

Rollie brushed him aside. He pointed to the corner of the room and rasped at me.

"You see that gun-case, Jumbo? Open it!"

It was all so quick that the thing was over almost before I had realised what had happened. Out of the corner of my eye, as I turned dazedly to obey Rollie's behest, I saw Gilbert make a sudden movement—saw the swift gleam of a pistol barrel, and then Gilbert was flat on his back, powerless, with Rollie's fingers on his throat.

"It took old Muldoo two months to teach me the Yunassi throw," he said grimly, removing the pistol from Gilbert's nerveless hand. "Quick, open the gun-case, Jumbo!"

Like a man in a dream I lifted out the parts. Yes, there it was, hidden under the tow in the cleaning-kit compartment—a dainty morocco case, ornamented and clasped in gilt. With a heavy heart and full of disillusioned thoughts, I pressed the clasp, disclosing, on a cradle of green velvet, an immense diamond that glowed and sparkled with a thousand internal fires—the diamond I had last seen scintillating on Glory's breast.

"A pretty thing, isn't it?" laughed Gilbert. "May I take a chair? Thank you. You soldiers aren't quite such fools as I thought. Would it be too much to ask how you traced it, Dennistoun?"

Rollie answered him sternly, unmoved by the compliment.

"The astonishing thing is," he said, "that we were ever taken in at all. If it had been a genuine attempt to make Miss van Tuyl give up her diamond that blood-and-thunder rigmarole would hardly have been written in a script that neither she nor anybody else in the house—except you—could understand."

"As soon as it became obvious that Prithvi Raj was not the thief the significance of that fact fairly hit me in

the eye, and it occurred to me that from your window you had probably remarked the Prince's habit of praying in the grove, which, combined with the way you all along tried to throw suspicion on him, pretty well solved the problem. I'm bound to say, though," he added with a harsh laugh, "your whole scheme, in view of the delicacy of the boundary negotiations, was most devilishly ingenious!"

"Quite—quite," said Gilbert with a deprecatory flourish. "But how did you know it was in the gun-case?"

"A man of your brilliance," said Rollie satirically, "would naturally conceal it in the most improbable place. As we were going in to dinner I noticed a tiny oil stain on your usually super-immaculate cuff, and some almost imperceptible threads of tow caught up in the sleeve link; which," he added with a touch of regret, for no one could help liking Gilbert, "considerably put me off my feed."

And then a horrible thought occurred to me. "One thing more," I said. "Who was the mysterious phosphorescent priest who tried to scare Miss van Tuyl out of her wits?"

With incredible callousness Gilbert shrugged his shoulders.

"Alone I did it!" he said, lighting a cigarette.

"You filthy swine!" I shouted, rushing at him; but Rollie stopped me.

"One minute, Jumbo." He turned to Gilbert again. "Now will you return the courtesy and tell us *why* you took it?"

Gilbert's dazzling smile, tempered with a tinge of wistfulness, broke out over his handsome features.

"Ambition, Dennistoun, ambition. It is my double misfortune to be at the same time desperately poor, and to be cast in a heroic mould—not like you lesser men, content with things as they are. If I could have got away with that stone"—he looked regretfully at the diamond blazing in my hand—"the path to Parliament and world-wide power lay open at my feet." Again the wistful smile spread over his face, and he went on



dreamily. "Life should be blindingly bright, a thing of infinite spaciousness. When the shadows begin to close in——"

This time he took even Rollie by surprise. Quick as thought he snatched back the pistol, and before we could seize his wrist there was a flash and a crack, and the career of Gilbert Sharde, most brilliant of young archæologists, had come to its untimely end.

As we stared at the carpet-dyeing huddle on the floor, there floated in to us out of the immense void of night, like the primal note of evil, a low, exultant throbbing from Shiva's grove.

"I wonder," said Rollie, solemnly, taking the diamond from my hand, "if this is the Eye of Fire after all?"

But that is one of the many things about India that will never now be known, for, true to her word, Glory flung that fateful gem far out into the unfathomable sea.

Yet, so strange a thing is life, that out of this terrible drama, there came to me the greatest—but that comes after.

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## THE GULISTAN MYSTERY

IN so far as concerned the designs of man, old Rollie usually succeeded in bringing to a swift and satisfactory conclusion those various hair-raising affairs with which we were perpetually confronted in Mahdipur. But in the East there is, beyond and behind the designs of man, another factor—a factor dread and incalculable. The gods of the heathen, as is well-known to every right-minded man, are of brass and stone, and, therefore, to be disregarded as such.

Yet these same heathen gods have an ungodly way of mixing themselves up in shady human affairs, which is, to say the least of it, disconcerting to men reared under our easy Western Providence; and though Rollie was able to uncover broadly the manner and motives of the Gulistan Mystery, and though Humphrey Paulett is now to all appearances a sane man, happily married and thought highly of in Simla, there are points about that case which we never quite succeeded in comprehending—points which must for ever be allowed to lie in that illimitable eastern phantasmagoria of “Unfathomable Things.”

It does not amuse a man to be blatantly derided—nor yet to be called a liar, point-blank, in the club bar, which is one reason why Rollie and I kept our mouths tight shut concerning that horrible affair. But since the tale contains a moral for white men inhabiting India—namely, to leave severely alone those brass and stone gods of the heathen—it may be not without profit to make public the frightful consequences of Humphrey Paulett’s slight lapse in that direction.

The trouble began at the time when Rollie—and for the matter of that, Simla and Downing Street itself,—

were gravely concerned about the state of Gulistan. One-third of our Indian Empire, as most schoolboys could tell you, consists of independent states, ruled over by native princes, who, protected on all sides by British India, have nothing in particular to worry about except their own amusements, which, generally speaking, are nasty.

If the young Maharajah of Gulistan had been contented with peaceably debauching himself to death, after the tradition of his kind, all would have been in order. Unfortunately, however, that besotted potentate, seeking refinements of diversion, had brought back from Paris a dangerous plaything—to wit, a lady whose beauty was only matched by her brains, and whose movements were followed with interest by certain offices in all the capitals of Europe. And shortly after her arrival it became known to Rollie and two men in the Intelligence, that a brisk interchange of emissaries was afoot between Gulistan and that sinister Power whose tentacles were ceaselessly feeling their way over the Oxus.

Already there were ominous signs and portents in the sky for those who knew how to read; affairs were marching in a direction that was incompatible with the dignity of the British Empire and the peace of the nations; and Rollie remarked to me with emphasis that it was lucky we had so good a man as Humphrey Paulett in the post of Political Agent at the Court of Gulistan.

“Hump’s a rummy looking little bird, Jumbo,” said Rollie one evening, after a perusal of that officer’s latest report, “but no man has a clearer grasp of native state psychology. But”—Rollie shook his head dubiously—“it will take even old Hump all his time to stymie La Belle Laverina.”

Thus was the plaything named, who was using the infatuated young ruler for nefarious, far-reaching purposes, and, as Rollie had indicated, the man who could checkmate that woman might command his own price from any secret service bureau. Nevertheless, Humphrey Paulett made steady headway through that poisonous tissue of sedition and intrigue that was spreading, like a cancer, over the breadth of Gulistan; and towards the

end of the hot weather he came up to Mandala—the small hill station where our Mahdipur Government used to summer—to talk over the situation.

Life is long, but I shall not forget that week-end in a hurry! Goodness knows, what poor old Hump had to tell us was bad enough, but it was his appearance, the ghastly appearance of the man, that knocked me edge-ways. People write and talk lightly about the “white man’s burden,” but only as I stared horrified at Hump there, where we sat listening to him in the Governor’s office, did I realise how shattering that burden could be.

A few months before, Humphrey Paulett had been a plump, robin-like little fellow with pink cheeks and goggling pince-nez, whose cheery laugh was a byword in the club. Now I was shocked to behold the mere ghost of my former friend—a shrunken, mud-complexioned wreck, whose eyes, as he talked, burned feverishly bright. It was obvious that the magnitude and responsibility of his great work were consuming him body and soul.

Which was not surprising; for as he told the Governor with quick, nervous gestures how he had at last seized upon the final filament in the tangled web of that diabolical and gigantically organised conspiracy, and how, after laboriously following it through a thousand sinister windings, he was on the very verge of a disclosure that would stagger the world, my blood fairly fired in my veins, and I stared at Hump with gaping admiration. Small wonder, by Jove, that the little man had worked himself to a shadow in the chase of such colossal game!

“Another month, sir,” he was saying eagerly to the Governor, “and I’ll have fitted the last piece into the jig-saw, and then”—he flourished his pince-nez triumphantly—“you’ll be able to hand the completed pattern over to the Foreign Office!”

For a moment the three of us—the Governor, Rollie and I—could only gaze speechless at Hump, wiping the cold sweat of excitement off his brow. To us, who knew the methods and ramifications of that sinister Power, which was ever subterraneously working for the overthrow of civilisation, the significance of Hump’s state-

ment rendered the spoken word futile. And it was the Governor, looking anxiously at Hump's ghastly face, that at last broke the portentous silence.

"Do they suspect in Gulistan how much you know, Paulett?"

Humphrey uttered a harsh laugh.

"There's not much under the sun that La Belle Laverina doesn't know, sir! Why"—the ghost of the old cheery grin wreathed his face—"would you believe it, she had the infernal cheek to try her love-stuff on *me!*"

In spite of the grimness of the situation, this was almost too much for our gravity—the idea of little robin Hump playing Joseph to the most lovely Potiphar's wife in Europe! And yet I admired the little man all the more for his superhuman moral strength, while Rollie mildly pulled his leg.

"We'll have to cable to the little lady in Cheltenham, Hump!" he chuckled; but the Governor was speaking again.

"Meanwhile you'd better take a week's leave up here, Paulett," he said solicitously. "You badly need a rest, my boy—rest and cool air."

Hump regarded this kindly counsel as an insult.

"No, sir, really not!" he protested. "I must get back to-morrow. Every moment is vital. If once I lose the thread, I may never be able to pick it up again." He looked suspiciously from the Governor to Rollie, and added in a lower tone, "You don't think they'll poison me?"

The Governor coughed uncomfortably behind his hand.

"No, no, my boy, certainly not. It was merely your health I was considering. Poison you?" the old man's eyebrows stood out fiercely, "they wouldn't dare touch one hair of your head!"

This, I knew, was true enough. Much latitude is allowed to the native ruler, but there is one thing he may *not* do—and he knows it—and that is to tamper with the health of His Majesty's representative. And whatever Hump's private ideas may have been on that intensely personal subject, his real old cheery laugh of former days rang out.

"Poison or no poison," he declared, "I'm off back to-morrow!"

And no persuasions or monitions could change his purpose. He refused inflexibly to leave his great work that was nearing the tremendous climax—such being a peculiarity of the British temperament. And for my part, as I looked at the stout-hearted little robin of a man, I never felt prouder than at that moment of belonging to a much-misrepresented race.

"Isn't Hump great?" I gurgled to Rollie when we had left the office; but Rollie did not respond to my enthusiasm.

"Um—ye-es, but His Ex. was right. No one can work eighteen hours a day in that filthy climate, and the poor little devil's more than half over the edge of a nervous breakdown already. It's madness not to take a rest—sheer, suicidal madness."

The truth of which sage diction was startlingly demonstrated that evening when we took Hump for a ride round Mandala Point. Hump had been silent and jumpy throughout, his thoughts engrossed by the all-absorbing conspiracy, and when suddenly his horse shied at the grubby little image of Ganpatti that is rudely carved in the raw granite of Mandala Rock, his over-taut nerves seemed to snap. This slender straw, in fact, broke the camel's back, for Humphrey Paulett, shining light of the Political, proceeded to behave like an hysterical girl; in that he, raising his whip, smote the merry little god across his elephant-trunked nose.

Ganpatti himself, being a philosopher, and the most amiable of the gods, and, moreover, very old, and of very hard stone; did not so much as flicker an eyelid: but in less than half a minute the place was alive and humming. The usual Indian crowd, where religion is in question, had magically sprung up out of the ground, shouting uglily, and Rollie, who understood the inwardness of the matter, calculated that things might occur.

"Quick, Hump!" he whispered, "apologise and let's git!"

And Hump, deeply shocked by his own momentary loss of self-control, rose to the occasion like a man.

"Oh, priests and men of Mandala," he said, turning his horse's head to the loud-clamouring multitude, "I, being weak with fever, have done a shameful thing. For this I ask your pardon, and, further, I ask leave to send gifts for the propitiation of Ganpatti and the adornment of his shrine."

It was impressive, the way old Hump spoke, and the effect was instantaneous.

"*Aiye, hya*; the Sahib says well!" yelled the volatile mob, completely mollified by the dignified humility of so high an official. "The Sahib, as all may see, is weak with fever. He meant no harm. Ganpatti will forgive!"

"Good old Hump!" I breathed with huge relief, for I was not yet tired of life. But it seemed that we were not yet out of the wood. As Rollie hurried us through the now-cheering mob, a stark, ash-and-ochre-smeared spectre with wild eyes and foul-matted hair, rose up like a ghoul in front of Hump's pony.

"Nay," he shrilled, in a sort of neighing scream, "Ganpatti will *not* forgive! Brethren of Mandala, ye have seen our Deity polluted by this flesh-eater. Ye have heard him try to cover his deed with bribes of gold. Listen now to me, speaking with the dumb mouth of outraged Ganpat." He turned again to Hump with such a baleful glare in his wild yellow cat's eyes that our ponies snorted and tried to break away.

"And you, oh, white-faced defiler," he screeched, "think not to escape! The ire of the god shall pursue your works, and the fruit of your great works shall wither like summer grass. Ye thought to wed, but the bride shall not cross the seas. Sickness shall fall heavy upon you, and horror and rising horror shall compass you about, even until the dark world enter into your soul and ye perish—and ye perish, amid torments manifold, to rot in a stranger's land!"

The naked creature pitched forward on to the dusty road, foaming horribly at the mouth. It was not a pretty sight.

"Sweet and to the point!" I commented, with an attempt at a laugh. But the laugh didn't sound particularly mirthful, for, truth to tell, I would have parted

with many months' pay rather than this thing had happened. True, the gods of the heathen might be of brass and stone, but still. . . .

"Come on!" whispered Rollie, taking advantage of the awe-struck hush that had fallen upon the crowd at the spectacle of the ascetic's paroxysm. "It's only a common or garden *yogi*!" he added reassuringly to Hump, who looked sick, as we rode quietly away. "Think no more about it, old chap!"

That night Hump's fever rose, and he was slightly delirious. He kept asking us if we had seen the way Ganpatti had wagged his trunk at him. Stone trunks don't wag, and the inquiry caused Rollie to glance at me oddly. But in the morning Hump's fever had passed, and without even mentioning the incident he departed again for Gulistan, filled with his unquenchable ardour for the great work.

"What do you make of it?" I asked uneasily of Rollie when we had seen Hump off down the hill.

"Nothing more than the old story, Jumbo," he replied, gazing after the vanishing car. "Just a venomous *fakir* seizing the opportunity to load a British official with odium. All the same, though," he added, pensively, flicking his pony's wither, "I wish it hadn't happened!"

"You *do* think there's something in it, then?" I persisted.

"There's this much," he admitted. "The one great thing that matters is for Hump to finish his job. You heard him raving about Ganpatti last night? Well, if this thing's going to prey on his mind in his present nervy condition, he'll collapse for a certainty. And then"—Rollie waved his whip northward with a significant flourish—"phut goes the most stupendous coup of the century!"

Rollie, of course, as his habit was, looked at the thing purely from the standpoint of duty. I, less patriotically perhaps, was more perturbed about poor old Hump himself.

"If he doesn't crock up," I said, "I suppose His Ex. was right, eh? They wouldn't dare poison him, I mean?"



"Oh, dear no," returned Rollie with finality; "they wouldn't dare *poison* him!"

What precisely the accentuation of that word signified, I was not then to know, for Rollie was in that mood of his when I knew it would be sheer waste of time to press for explanations. So I said no more, though, I confess, I was haunted for many days by Hump's ghastly face, and his delirious mutterings about Ganpatti's trunk-wagging.

But as time went on, Hump, contrary to Rollie's prediction, did *not* break down, and his cypher-reports continued to arrive regularly, red-hot and glowing with the ardour of his mighty chase, every moment drawing nearer to the stupendous kill. And then one evening, even as we hung on the wire's end, waiting for the latest breathless developments, there burst in upon us, in *shikar* kit, and all unshaven, old Ginger Sarson of the Horse Battery, white to the gills, and with unholy terror starting out from his eyes.

He'd just returned from a shooting trip in Gulistan, he explained incoherently, and he had something very particular to say—something that wouldn't keep. And I knew, with a sick sort of sinking, as I saw his hand tremble on the decanter, that we were not exactly in for glad tidings.

"Gulistan, eh? Did you happen to see old Hump down there?" asked Rollie in a matter-of-fact voice, affecting not to notice the other's agitation. And then out it all came with a gulping rush.

"Rather! Should jolly well think I did. Stayed with him a couple of nights. In fact, that's what I came to see you about, Rollie."

"Oh?" said Rollie with raised eyebrows. "Anything wrong with old Hump?"

"Wrong?" spluttered Ginger, gulping at his drink. "Wrong? I should damn well say there is!"

But when Rollie wanted to know what the something *was* wrong, Ginger shook his head in a helpless sort of way.

"I don't know, old boy," he stammered, "that's the devil of it—I don't know!"

I admit I didn't find this reply particularly reassuring. Next to Rollie himself no man in India had a more lurid reputation for sheer, cold-blooded, dare-devilry than old Ginger; and here was that great hefty mountain of muscle stammering and quaking like a Bengali babu. Obviously things were bad with old Hump, and for once even Rollie looked worried.

"Don't be a blinking ass, Ginger," he said sharply. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Then Ginger told us—as much as he could—and what he did manage to blurt out sounded, with the broad sunlight still blazing along the veranda, more like a child's bogey than the experiences of a lusty, bull-necked Briton.

"Of course you fellows think I ought to be shut up in a loony house," he ended his extraordinary narrative apologetically, afraid that we might laugh at him. But we didn't; far from it. Rollie remained thoughtful, and, for my part, I'd never felt less like laughing in my life.

And yet Ginger's story amounted to nothing—absolutely nothing. Actually, in the broad light of day and reason, it was absurd. He had spent two nights in Hump's bungalow. He had not enjoyed those nights, and no wealth under the canopy of heaven would induce him to spend another; so much so that he had sacrificed five whole days of his precious leave, to hurry up to Mandala and tell us.

But when we adjured him with blasphemy to be more explicit, he only became vaguer still. To start with, he told us, shuddering, Hump had grown ghastly to the eye, and something about the poor devil shouted aloud that the soul within him was the soul of a man in bondage. But that wasn't the worst of it. All night through—he didn't quite know how to put it—the bungalow was tenanted by a Horror—a thing that ebbed and flowed and pervaded the atmosphere, invisible, yet palpably pregnant with malign and monstrous intent—sapping and dragging at the very roots of a man's manhood.

But there was worse even than that. While he, Ginger, had lain awake and sweating in the toils of this unknown, he had heard a most appalling sound—the

broken, awful sound of poor Hump crying out to this thing in mortal terror—crying as the felon might cry to the executioner.

"I'm not much good at describing things," said Ginger, mopping his clammy face, "but it turns me queer to think of that sound even now!"

I believed him. Ginger may not have been an inspired word painter, but his physical condition was more eloquent and convincing than any wordy realism, and my own knees began to shake at the thought of what was happening in that bungalow.

"Did you mention this—this thing to Hump?" asked Rollie.

"You bet! but he only laughed it off. Put it down to nightmare on my part after tinned lobster." Ginger jerkily poured himself out another two-finger peg. "And I might have believed him if it hadn't happened *both* nights, and if it wasn't for that ghastly damned look in Hump's eyes."

There was a pause, broken only by the gulping sizzle of the soda in Ginger's dry mouth, and then Rollie asked a characteristic question.

"Does Hump seem to be carrying on with his work?"

"Rather," responded Ginger. "Sweats in his office all day, and most of the night."

"By gad!" exclaimed Rollie with an unwonted warmth, in which I heartily concurred, "he's a plucky little devil!"

And when Ginger, after further offensives on the whisky, had departed, a sore-troubled man, I looked Rollie straight in the eye.

"Look here, old lad," I demanded, "is or is not this thing to do with friend Ganpatti?"

Rollie did not directly reply. He arose and regarded with passionate interest the large scale map of Central Asia that covered one-half of the wall. It was all criss-crossed over with cyphers and hieroglyphics that symbolised the result of Hump's labours down in Gulistan. These, together with the labours of other wide-flung and mysterious men, whose lives no sane insurance office would accept, were co-ordinated on that chart in a man-

ner that, you might say, balanced the future peace of the nations : and studying it intently, Rollie heaved a wistful sigh.

"It'll be hellish if they escape us now—on the post, so to speak!"

"Which they surely will"—I dotted the "i" for him—"if old Hump breaks down?"

"You've said it, Jumbo." Rollie turned abruptly away from the map. "Whether Hump's in the toils of god or man or devil, I wouldn't care at this moment to bet; but whatever it is"—he clapped me on the shoulder, the light of action shining in his eyes once more—"we've got to see Hump through it. We're starting for Gulistan to-night, Jumbo!"

"Good!" I exclaimed as heartily as might be, but a cold sinking within warned me that I didn't look forward to the visit one little bit. The Ganpatti incident and the filthy foaming-mouthed *fakir* had not impressed me with favour at the time. And now a man of Ginger's notorious robustness, gibbering and babbling about the Horror like a neurotic she-child, hardly tended to improve that impression. No, I didn't like it one tiny bit, and it was in no merry mood that I departed to write to the mater before packing my kit.

The bungalow of the Political Agent at the Court of Gulistan was a vast and gloomy affair of many drearily-echoing, empty rooms, and my spirits dropped below zero as our feet rang hollowly on the veranda.

"We've come to discuss the *coup*, Jumbo," Rollie admonished me, striding towards the single office-bedroom occupied by Hump. "Not a word, remember, about the Ganpatti incident—or Ginger's Horror."

When Rollie spoke like that one did not argue, and when we burst breezily in upon Hump, engrossed in a pile of maps and cypher codes, I began to wonder if Ginger hadn't had a touch of the sun after all. The little fellow, of course, looked perfectly ghastly, but not much worse than when we'd last seen him up at Mandala, and the slight deterioration could easily be accounted for by overwork and the heat. And as to the strange, strained expression in his eyes, well, the intense

excitement of having almost traced to its source the last of those thousand radiations of the vast, sinister world-enmeshing web, was enough to make any man's eyes glitter oddly.

So much so, that while hour after breathless hour Hump laid bare in eager tones the whole gigantic, brain-staggering combination, my own red-hot desire to clinch the thing grew to such an uncontrollable pitch that I completely forgot all about Ginger's Horror. And when at last Hump jabbed in his compass point on the conspiracy's storm centre with a smile of triumph, Rollie smote him enthusiastically across the shoulders.

"Fine!" he shouted, "superfine! When this little affair's wound up, Hump, we'll see you get a year's leave home, and"—he grinned across at me—"old Jumbo and I will run home too, to buzz a magnum at the wedding!"

This was after dinner, just as we were going to turn in, and the pathos of that quick spasm that shot across Hump's face at this allusion to his fiancée caused me suddenly to blow my nose. The despair of it—its pitiable, utter hopelessness—was the saddest thing I'd ever seen: the look one used to see in men's eyes in the war days, who *knew* they were going over the top for the last time.

"Oh, my wedding?" he muttered, "we've got to bring off this show first!"

And there was a note of such profound resignation in his voice, so poignantly contrasted with the vivacity with which he had expounded the details of his imminent *coup*, that it brought back with a chilling rush all my nameless apprehensions, and I lay down in my barrack of a room with nerves idiotically twittering—with thankfulness, moreover, that I had brought Sambo, my huge Rampur hound, who laid him down according to custom across the threshold of the door. For there is no *morale* raiser like to a faithful dog.

Sleeplessness is not one of my vices, but I soon found myself lying stark awake with the hair prickling on my scalp. I knew in an instant what it is very difficult to explain—the thing that Ginger had meant when he gibbered incoherently about that "Horror." The air

was full of it, a thick, clammy, enveloping something, that was intensely, personally malignant. It was as though my soul tottered frantically on the brink of perdition, and this fell thing was slowly and relentlessly pushing it over, pushing it into the bottomless pit—that dread abyss where the lost ones eternally writhe and moan in unimaginable torment. And to make matters worse, while I lay cold-bathed in a sweat of terror, the monsoon chose that moment to burst.

Amid salvos of loud-crashing thunder a hissing wall of rain smote against the bungalow, so that the ceiling cloth above my head bellied and undulated with the mad tumult of it, and with the startled scurrings of rats, bats, snakes, and other foul things that dwelt beneath the thatch. But the feature that increased most my unhappiness was that Sambo, the Rampur hound, had deserted me. Starting up with a tremendous effort out of my fear-paralysis, I saw a sight that froze the very marrow in my bones. The veranda was all ablaze with the vivid flare of the lightning, and in that blue, ghastly limelight stood the great dog, tense-stiff, hackles alift, glaring into the room, glaring—and that was the awfulness of it—at something I couldn't see!

I called hoarsely, but for the first time known, he disobeyed, and while my mouth parched and the horror thickened around me in great soul-choking waves, and I seemed just over the edge of that dreadful abyss, a sudden terrible sound caused the dog to turn tail and flee, howling into the fury of the night. It came from the direction of Hump's room, that unearthly, wailing cry—the same, no doubt, that had scared Ginger half out of his wits—and in an instant I had dashed panic-stricken to Rollie's bedside.

"Thought you'd come, Jumbo," he said, likewise leaping out of bed, and even his face was deathly white. "Can't say I'd recommend this villa to my maiden aunt. There's something about it that seems to dislike us!" He grabbed his pistol as another inhuman wail came shuddering to us above the storm. "Come on, Jumbo. Softly, old lad, softly!"

Hump's room was at the far end of the bungalow.

Had it not been for Rollie's iron grip on my arm I should never have faced the horror-saturated emptiness of the intervening rooms—for fright and that dreadful sound made me feel sick—physically sicker than from anything I had seen or heard in dressing stations after battle. Nor did my sickness diminish, when, reaching the threshold of Hump's door, we peered cautiously through the *chic*.

I did not, of course, expect to see anything particularly pleasant, but the sight that did meet our eyes convinced me for one terrifying moment that I must have gone clean stark staring mad. It was impossible to believe that that dreadfully howling creature that half-crawled, half-dragged itself across the floor, could be poor old Hump! And while I stared aghast with palsy-smitten limbs, he raised himself on his knees and clawed frantically at the bare wall.

"Nothing, nothing! Only wall!" He cackled out an awful maniac laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! Only wall, only wall!"

Outside in the storm that hideous laughter was taken up by Sambo's unearthly howl, and though the thermometer stood at eighty-six degrees, a death-cold chill struck through my heart, so that my knees began to go from under me.

"Steady, Jumbo!" whispered Rollie, his grip tightening on my arm. But at that which occurred on the next instant I felt Rollie's hand tremble almost as violently as my own. Suddenly in the furthest recess of the palpitating, lightning-stabbed gloom, there began to grow a weird and widening luminosity—a sort of spreading phosphorescent glow. And this astounding apparition had an effect upon poor Hump that cannot be adequately described in words.

"Not again! Oh, my God! Not again; not again!" he yelled, grovelling on the floor, and before that agonised scream had lost itself in the tumult of the elements there occurred before our very eyes a manifestation of the supernatural.

The patch of luminosity, growing swiftly in brilliance and extent, developed sudden definition, and the shape

that it took was the shape of the elephant-headed god; the shape, no less, than of Ganpatti of Mandala Rock : but with this addition, that, from the trunk, where Hump had struck him, there fell great drops of blood. But it was poor Hump's own behaviour that held me horror-bound.

"Foul thing!" he screamed, cowering away, hands up to his eyes. "You *shan't* kill me—before my work is done. You—oh-h-h-h . . .!"

No wonder he yelled, poor devil! With an indescribably evil gesture the image wagged its bleeding trunk at him—slowly shook its head and wagged its bleeding trunk!

As from afar off I heard Rollie's pistol ring out; saw the bullet smack a great slab of plaster off the wall—slick through the image; I saw the image, with a cynical leer, still wagging its trunk. And then it was that I did the unpardonable thing; for my next memory is of lying on my own bed, drenched to the skin, with Rollie sitting heavily on my chest. He has never mentioned that episode since, but I suppose he must have caught me in the act of fleeing cravenly through the compound.

"Try this, old boy," he said, shoving a flask of raw brandy between my teeth.

And when, the reviving spirit having wrought, I wanted to know at once if the car were ready—since obviously no one in their senses could possibly spend an unnecessary moment in that ghastly place—Rollie answered with a calmness that was positively indecent.

"We remain one more night, Jumbo."

Another night! Not if I knew it! And I began putting the matter to him with emphatic impoliteness, when he quickly stopped me.

"It's got to be done, Jumbo. Apart from the little matter of the *coup*, it happens to be requisite and necessary for the salvation of Hump's soul."

The salvation of Hump's soul? I didn't pretend to know, in my overwrought state, what Rollie was driving at. But then, I very often didn't; and when it was put like that, and, further, in the voice that Rollie put it in, what could a man do? Moreover, the dawn was now



slashing the compound with warm, yellow-gold bars, and in the sunshine the worst of night fears have a way of appearing ridiculous—and any further objections on my part were checked by the arrival of *chota-hazri*, and the pyjama-clad figure of Hump himself.

"Hullo, you fellows!" he hailed us with a heroic show of cheeriness, though his face was the colour of cold bacon fat, and his eyes searched us anxiously. "Hope you weren't disturbed by the storm?"

"Slept like the dead, old boy," lied Rollie promptly, with a glance that eloquently gave me the cue of mum. And when Hump, after shakily gulping his tea, had departed again tub-wards, Rollie condescended to unbosom himself somewhat.

"That poor little devil"—he jerked his pipe towards Hump's bath-room—"is carrying on through downright eighteen carat will-pluck. If he knew we'd seen—well, what we have seen—he'd collapse like a shot rabbit."

"All the same," I murmured, for even in the broad day the horror of that bungalow lay cold upon me, "I don't see the point of letting him go through another night of inferno."

Whereat Rollie smiled enigmatically.

"I'm not much of a believer in devils," he drawled, "or in the gods of the heathen, which is much the same thing, and"—he grinned his old cheery grin—"I rather fancy there may be sensational developments to-night! On no account let Hump suspect we know anything."

The "long, long Indian day" is proverbial, but that particular day was a century. By dinner time Hump's absorbing zeal in the great *coup* began to flag, and he started staring apprehensively over our shoulders towards his own room, as though compelled thereto by the bonds of an invisible power, and with such an abyss of hell in his eyes that the Horror descended upon me again with overwhelming force. Sambo, to make things cheerier, lay out on the veranda, glowering uncannily, and I knew as sure as death, that terrible things were soon to happen.

And sure enough, as soon as Hump had gone off to bed, and the paralysing Horror had so fastened on my

senses that, beaten and powerless, I seemed at last to be going over that terrible brink of perdition, Rollie sprang into vigorous action.

"Pull yourself together, Jumbo," he rasped, shaking me roughly, as one shakes from fatal sleep a snake-bitten man; "it's now or never. We're going to try conclusions with the elephant-headed one!"

Before I had properly grasped what was happening, he had dragged me through the deep-shadowed gloom of the compound, and was placing a ladder against the side of the house. With wits rapidly returning, I followed him up, and through a sort of concealed trap-door in the thatch, into the pit-black, three-cornered cavern of the roof that lay between the underside of the thatch and the ceiling cloth.

But as soon as my head was through the small aperture there began to sound through that vaulted obscurity the hell-racked sound of poor Hump's agony, and had it not been for Rollie's firm grip on my shoulder, I should again have fled precipitately down the ladder.

"You attend to the lady, Jumbo," he commanded curtly, "I'll deal with the man."

There was an earthy ring about that order that cold-douched me back to sanity. Following Rollie's rapid and silent progress along the central ceiling beam, I made out, at the farther end of the arched cavity, a bright disc of light, and in the outer circle of its fading beam, two shadowy figures crouching. And before my bewildered brain had time to co-ordinate these matters, Rollie was upon them with uplifted pistol.

"Hands up!" he drawled, and as the two figures started up and glared wildly into his flashlight, he jerked over his shoulder at me. "Quick, Jumbo, disarm her, then bring her along down after me and my friend here."

Many surprising things had happened since we had first put foot in that devil-haunted bungalow, but this surely was the most surprising, that while we were stalking the spirit of that malignant idol, I should find myself looking into the most beautiful face I had ever yet beheld. And what time Rollie urgently persuaded his captive back to

the ladder by the impolite method of a pistol-point against his spine, I, instead of obeying his behest, stood owlishly gaping at the wonder of that Cleopatra vision, till a quick, unwomanly movement on the part of the said vision achieved my undoing.

Abruptly doubling up at that lightning elbow punch in the wind, I floundered off the beam on to the ceiling cloth, which, swinging beneath my weight like a hammock, sagged, ripped out from the walls, split, and slid me among a litter of filthy *débris* on to Hump's bed below.

This, of course, was empty, for the poor devil was grovelling, half-crazed, on the floor over against where Ganpatti had appeared, and before I had extricated myself from the clinging tatters of the ceiling cloth, Rollie arrived with his victim, at the sight of whom Hump let out scream after heart-rending scream, and I, in my amazement, exclaimed aloud: for this captive was no other than the *fakir* who had cursed Hump at Mandala Point.

"So La Belle Laverina was too sharp for you, eh!" sized up Rollie regretfully. "A pity, but no matter! Our friend here will complete the jig-saw. Shoot him if he moves, Jumbo!"

And while I covered the repulsive, mat-haired creature, Rollie strode to where poor Hump cowered away from this second apparition out of the dark world. "It's only your old acquaintance, Hump," he said cheerily, "very much in the flesh! You've been the victim of a diabolical hoax, that's all. Look up there!"

Rollie pointed up through the gaping ceiling cloth into the dark vacuity of the roof beams. The small disc of light still shone, and from the light of Hump's lamp I could now see that it emanated from a camera-like instrument on a tripod.

"You see that?" exclaimed Rollie. "Your blessed Ganpatti spook was nothing more than a piece of superb cinematography."

Over poor Hump's face there spread the look of a man who, having been through nethermost Hades, is emerging on the other side.

"My God!" he gasped, "you don't say I'm not devil-ridden, or mad, after all?"

But the touch of Rollie's strong arm on his shoulder dissolved all doubt.

"No, old Hump," he said, with a wonderful kindness. "Overwork and the heat played old Harry with your nerves. These swine, as His Ex. said, didn't dare murder you, but by a brilliant genius stroke they seized on the opportunity of your over-wrought condition to drive you dotty instead. This gentleman here"—Rollie gazed sternly at the cowering *fakir*—"had been dogging you for months, and witnessing the Ganpatti incident, he jumped at this fiendish expedient of getting rid of you."

After every crisis there comes reaction. These words recalled to Hump the failure of his great work, and the wonderful gladness faded from his face.

"The *coup*," he groaned; "just as I had unravelled the last thread! And I'm done now; my brain's stopped working, Rollie—stopped working. . . ."

Burying his head in the pillows he burst out into a broken sobbing; but Rollie's voice, as he patted the convulsive shoulders, was full of triumphant balm.

"Here's your final thread, Hump!" He indicated with his pistol barrel the naked *fakir*. "True, La Belle Laverina has made her get-away, but this is Z. 127, whom we've been searching for, for so long!"

Hump's face flooded with a new-born rapture.

"The jig-saw is completed, then?" he cried.

"It is, old Hump. You've put through the great *coup* after all."

Joy can be more devastating than terror. The iron will-force that had kept Hump going through those months of nerve-racked torture now snapped, as a steel band snaps, in the crowning moment of his victory, and he fell back unconscious on the bed.

"There, by God, is a *man*!" muttered Rollie. "We'll get him off home by the next mail, Jumbo." Then, turning to the priest of Ganpatti, who had stood like a statue throughout, except for the fire smouldering in his

eyes: "And now we'll make you comfortable, my friend! Your evidence will be valuable."

"Nay," said the ash-smeared *fakir*, speaking for the first time, and with singular impressiveness, "there is more behind this than a picture lantern. We, who serve Ganpatti, give not evidence in the courts of the flesh-eaters!"

Before Rollie could intervene he had raised a hand to his lips, and that swift drug that every agent of the sinister Power carries under the index finger nail was bearing its fatal message to his heart.

"He was right, Rollie," I murmured, as we watched the man's death throes on the floor; "there's more behind this than a little film stuff. The Horror that all but killed Hump, scared Ginger out of his wits, and drove Sambo and me gibbering into the night, was a deadly *real* thing."

"It may have been mass hypnotism," opined Rollie, throwing a sheet over the now stiffening corpse. "We know that the late Z.127 here, like many Orientals, had powers that way, and that would account for all of you being so bemused as to have been taken in by that brilliant piece of picture work."

"Personally, not being a hypnotic subject, I wasn't taken in, and," he grinned, "the best idol-spirits don't leave footprints in gardens! All the same," he added in graver tones, for horror still hung heavy and palpable over that death chamber, "if one wishes to avoid the madhouse it's best not to inquire too closely into certain things that happen out here. And anyway, old Jumbo," he clapped me on the back in his old gay manner, "we've saved Hump, and we've landed the great *coup*—and we'll let it go at that!"

Which we did, and although the exigencies of the trial in the now world-famous Gulistan Conspiracy Case prevented us from attending a certain wedding at Cheltenham, Rollie was able to complete the joyousness of that joyful occasion by cabling that His Majesty had graciously signified his intention of conferring on the bridegroom the coveted "Order of the Star of India."

## WATERS OF DESTRUCTION

THE huge, gilded, candelabra-glittering ball-room of Government House was bathed in an unwonted glow. His Excellency the Governor, treading the formal steps of the State Lancers, positively radiated geniality; Her Excellency, at tops opposite, even achieved some faint semblance of a smile; and the residents of Mahdipur, be-uniformed and be-jewelled according to species, reacted joyously as they jazzed over the spacious glass-polished floor.

Throughout his term of office the Governor's dearest wish—almost, you might say, his ruling passion—had been the construction of the great Lohari Barrage. And now at last, owing in most part to the genius and courage of James Forbes Hearson, of the Public Works Department, that monumental work was nearing completion.

For two years and eleven months had James Forbes Hearson, P.W.D., and his crawling, toiling armies of coolies battled against flood and flies and sun, against cholera and small-pox; and now at last the great work—"work" as North-country Hearson called it—was almost done.

Already a Royal Personage was on the sea, who, at the end of a fortnight, if all went well, would open the Barrage in state. There would be leading articles in all the papers of the world, and five million drought-starved cultivators, receiving the fruitful water at last, would for ever and ever bless the British Raj.

Smoking a quiet cigarette out in the grounds, down in the further end of a deep-shadowed jasmine pergola, I couldn't help smiling as I gazed through the mauresque

arches of the ball-room and beheld the Military Secretary chivalrously dancing with partner-less ducklings.

In the past months we'd been through some pretty tough jobs together, old Rollie Dennistoun and I—jobs to do with crime, with under-world intrigue, with mysterious and heathenish idolatries which would send the ordinary stay-at-home Britisher gibbering to the mad-house. But now, I reflected with a chuckle, owing to all this how-de-do about the Lohari Barrage, it looked as if we were in for a longish spell of ceremonial—gold lace and champagne, bunting, bands, and Union Jack.

I hardly noticed a couple saunter into the pergola and drop into a pair of intimately-placed cushioned chairs just in front of me. And it was only when I became aware that the man was proposing, earnestly, desperately proposing, that I realised my retreat was cut off—and decided in a flash that I had better stay quietly where I was in the heavy shadow than put a shy man off his stroke by embarrassing interruptions. For the man—I could vaguely make out his profile against the light-blur of the ball-room—was Hearson, James Forbes Hearson, no less, the hero of the Lohari Barrage.

He was an unsociable sort of chap, was Hearson—a great, gaunt, raw-boned, stooping fellow, with a shock of tousled red hair, harsh features and of a powerfully prayerful disposition. Not exactly the sort to help along a cheery evening; but there was now, by virtue of his great achievement, a glamour, a sort of halo, around him.

It was practically in his honour that the Governor had given this ball. Hearson had been summoned in the fifty-three miles from his work, was staying the night at Government House, and, before returning next day, would talk over the final plans for the Royal Opening of the Barrage. He was, as I have said, an ungracious, gruff-grunting sort of chap, and I could therefore hardly believe my ears while—involuntarily—I listened to his proposal.

Hearson's only reading, men said, was the Bible, and no doubt that was what gave the rude Scriptural eloquence to his speech. It was long, that deadly earnest proposal of his, but it was without any exception the

most impressive, almost the most moving, thing I had ever heard. He told her from the very start, that quiet woman in the shadows, how he had first conceived the mighty project of the Barrage; and then, with the fire and force of an inspired artist, amounting at times to rugged poetry, he described to her pile by pile, rivet by rivet, block by rough-hewn block, how the hostile spirit of the river had been subdued, and how, slowly, gradually, hour upon patient hour, the gigantic conception of his brain had materialised into massive and majestic form.

Until that moment the Lohari Barrage was to me nothing much more than a prosaic engineering fact, merely the next biggest dam to Assouan—just that. But now, as I listened, spell-bound, to Hearson, I realised for the first time the wonder of it, the romance that animated that mammoth pile of stone and steel; realised that it embodied the loftiest idealism, the heart and soul and passion of a man; that the thing itself was alive, vividly alive, with a spirit of its own, a spirit doomed to ceaseless and eternal warfare with the potent, omnipresent spirits of the elements.

When, grabbing the woman's hand in his great paw, Hearson came at last to the personal part of his proposal, there was, behind the raw, passionate accents of his voice, something of the immensity of that great creation of his: something too of its wild, unending conflict with the unseen forces of the universe.

"Lassie," he spoke gutturally, "these three years gone there wasna' an hour out yonder that I wasna' dreamin' of ye, dreamin' an' dreamin', lassie. An' a' through the lang nights an' days I was aye sayin' to mysel', when the worrk's done, and men'll say, 'Look, 'tis guid worrk'—then, said I to mysel', I'll take courage for to go an' ask my lassie—for although I'm only a rough sort of a chap, I'll have done one thing that's no unworrthy the name of a man. Lassie, lassie, will ye no have me?"

Fell a pregnant, palpitating silence. Breathless, in suspense keen almost as Hearson's own, I listened for the answer.



"Lassie?" he pleaded hoarsely.

And then it came, the answer of this heroically worshipped woman, and it was—I swear it—a snore, a slight but unmistakable snore!

Hearson shambled to his feet, and his face, where the lights from the house struck across the angular features, was not pretty to see.

"Yes, what's that?" said the woman, rousing. "Oh, yes, the dam—very interesting." She concealed a slight yawn behind her fan. "Do go and get me an ice, Mr. Hearson—and a ham sandwich."

But Hearson, towering above her with clenched fists and convulsively working face, made a rugged, terribly elemental figure.

"Ye scorn me—and the worrk I did for ye!" he choked; and turning on his heel, Hearson strode gauntly out of the pergola.

"Gad, Life's a rum go!" I meditated, watching the woman, patently puzzled, walking back alone across the lawn in pursuit of her ham sandwich. She was Jane Bayne, the Cantonment Magistrate's ugly, elderly daughter—plain Jane Bayne, with the face and mind of a suet pudding, notorious from Mahdipur to Mandalay as the stupidest woman east of Suez.

And it was she, of all women, who had inspired the genius that had been sublimated in the Lohari Barrage! What *could* a man like Hearson see in her, I wondered. The thing would have been laughable if it weren't so cruelly, so fiercely tragic.

The tragedy of it was still running in my mind while, several hours after, I superintended the A.D.C.'s in despatching our parting ball guests. And as the last car purred away from the red-carpeted, palm-canopied portals, a hand fell on my shoulder, and I looked around into the troubled eyes of old Rollie.

"Come along to my quarters, Jumbo," he said in a low voice. "Hearson's tight."

"Tight? Oh, rot, Rollie!" I couldn't help laughing at the absurdity of the notion, for Hearson was notoriously the most hopelessly confirmed teetotaller in

the Mahdipur District. But all the same, Rollie was right—not a doubt of it. The poor devil had been taking a drop, of course, to drown the pain of that incident in the pergola. And Pat Heffernan of the I.M.S., the Governor's doctor, was trying gently to persuade him to go to bed. But Hearson, apparently unconscious of Pat's presence, babbled disjointedly in Biblical phrase about his dam and the river.

"All the fountains of the great deep shall be broken up, an' the floodgates of heaven unloosed," he muttered thickly, with a wild eye on me. Then turning to Rollie with even wilder eyes, he muttered on. "Do ye mind Krakatoa, an' the great wave, high as a church steeple, that toppled over it an' obliterated the town like Sodom and Gomorrah from off the face of the earth? Aye, ye do. Consider then if my dam," he jerked a shaking hand northward in the direction of Lohari, "was to break, an' seventy-nine million million tons o' pent-up flood came thunderin' doon on top of Mahdipur? Man, I tell ye, Krakatoa would be forgotten in the completeness of that destruction."

"Come on now, come on now, Jock, don't be talkin' such nonsense." Pat slipped a compelling arm under the huddled shoulders. "'Tis in bed you should be an' sleepin'."

And when—Rollie and I assisting—Hearson had been laid on his own bed, and the three of us had gathered again in Rollie's room, Rollie addressed us with perturbation.

"Hell!" he said tersely, "we're within a fortnight of the biggest thing ever achieved in India—and now Hearson's nerve has broken. Thinks his precious barrage is going to burst!"

"But," I asked—for Hearson's drunken babbling had given me a cold sinking in the pit of the stomach—"is the dam alright?"

"Of course it's alright," Rollie laughed shortly. "Sir Donald Thelluson certified the plans. It's just Hearson's nerve has gone. Never seen a more dreadful case of 'wind.'"

But the Doc took a less serious view.

"Ah, shure, 'twill be alright, Rollie," he laughed. "No man knows all poor Jock has been through, wid the floods an' all last year. He'll pull through the next fortnight, you'll see, an' then we'll pack'um off Home for a year's leave. 'Tis nothin' but the smell of the whisky on an overstrained and unhabituated system, an' that's all there is to ut. Let this be a warnin' to ye, Jumbo," he turned, laughing to me, "of the dangers of immoderate abstention!"

I didn't laugh though. The way poor Hearson had spoken, that wild look in his eyes, his appalling vision of the dam bursting, had, I admit it, thoroughly frightened me.

The feeling I had while listening to his proposal in the pergola—that feeling that his own mind was straining, stretched to utmost extent, as his dam might be strained against an overwhelming flood, was now stronger than ever upon me—only now I felt that the breaking point was imminent. And, in some disquieting, unfathomable fashion I *knew* that the breaking down of Hearson's mind, and the fate of that prodigious child of his mind, the Lohari Barrage, would be cataclysmically associated together. I *knew* that if one went, the two would come down together in tremendous ruin; and therefore I decided to betray Hearson's secret.

"Pat," I asked, "what sort of effect would a baddish love-knock have on a fellow like Hearson?"

"Ah, ye're getting beyond the depths of Science there, Jumbo," Pat replied. "A young rip like yourself would take no harm from a dozen knocks. But," he shook his head, "wid a harsh, virginal temperament like Jock Hearson's—overstrained into the bargain wid doin' three men's work for three years in a climate twenty degrees lower than Hades"—he shook his head again—" 'twould go hard—mighty hard."

And then, since the idea was morbidly crystallising in my mind that incomprehensible things, things far, far bigger than Hearson's blighted love, were hanging in the balance, I told them—told them of Hearson's soul-baring proposal in the pergola, of the tremendous passion

that had inspired and actuated the man's work, and of how his ideal woman had slept through the fervid declaration like a tired child.

"Poor devil," said Rollie gently, when I had finished, "poor, lonely devil!"

"Well, in Hearson's case," I returned to the point that was sinisterly pervading my incoherent consciousness, "what's the effect likely to be?"

Pat, a specialist in psychiatry, wagged a doubtful head.

"Ye can't tell, Jumbo, ye can't tell. Maybe he'll weather ut all right—though in Jock's case," he added thoughtfully, "I'd never be surprised if ut took the form of religious mania."

Whereat Rollie, who had listened with concentrated attention, asked point-blank:

"Do you think he ought to be relieved off the Barge, Pat?"

But Pat was strongly opposed to this.

"I do not, Rollie. In the first place ye know well that the work is chock-full of Hearson's own patents, and there's not another man in India that's capable of finishin' the job. And, secondly, 'twould be the cruellest thing ever done to rob him at the last moment of the honour an' glory. No, since 'tis the heart that's the trouble, the best thing poor Jock can do is to forget ut in his precious work."

"That's your considered professional opinion, Pat?"

"It is so, Rollie."

And though Rollie was clearly uneasy in his mind, and I was bogey-haunted by visions of a "grreat wave, high as a churrrh steeple, thunderin' doon on Mahdipur" and blotting it out as the spring rain blots out the ant-hills, we let it go at that—for the time.

"Not a word of this to a soul, you fellows," admonished Rollie, as we turned in. "At any price we must avoid raising a scare."

Next morning Hearson, to all appearances, was his usual taciturn, rough, gruff self again; had a long inter-

view with the Governor about the final arrangements for the State Opening of the Barrage; and departed—without a word of apology or reference to his lapse of the night before—back to his post on the Lohari.

Although the thought of that incalculable volume of prisoned water, held only in leash by Hearson's work and Hearson's will, continued to pervade the hidden chambers of my mind like a nervous obsession, nothing in any way untoward occurred until one afternoon about ten days later, when the Governor suddenly decided to go out and see how things were getting on at the Barrage.

"Don't 'phone Hearson," said His Excellency to Rollie, "I don't want to interrupt his work. We'll just drop in on him informally—you and I and Jumbo."

In spite of the execrable road that, after leaving Mahdipur, quickly degenerated into a sandy, deeply-rutted bullock and camel track, the big sixty Rolls, with Rollie at the wheel, brought us within sight and sound of the famous Lohari Barrage a good hour before sunset. It was a dreary desolation, that parched, shrub-studded wilderness, dotted thickly over with huge, volcanic boulders—grotesquely elemental as primal monsters in the cubist school—that stretched away from either side of the Lohari Gorge to the distant and encircling rampart of the Lohari Hills.

As we ploughed rapidly onward through the hub-deep sand, and there unrolled before us a panorama of the harsh earth slashed along and across by Hearson's construction lines, pitted small-pox fashion by the huts of his coolies, gashed and yawning with his deep-dug, edge-heaped borrow pits, its whole harsh face scarred for miles around by the years of Hearson's labour; and as, drawing yet nearer, we saw—spanning the mile-wide race between rock-hewn bank and rock-hewn bank of the Lohari Gorge—the austere, white-grey grandeur of Hearson's master work, rising sixty clear-cut, dizzy feet above the foaming turmoil of the lower stream; and away beyond, the stark outline of the Lohari Hills, stark as bare ribs in the skeleton of the world, my formless apprehensions of the past week returned with redoubled force. Here, I felt

with a morbid shudder, was the world's uttermost end; here was lifted restraint from all that is lawless and chaotic in the primal soul of man; and from this last grim rampart of the world could come the destruction of the world.

Nor was my disquietude lessened by the events of the next hour. Proceeding—the Governor, Rollie and I—along the forty-foot fairway of the Barrage, while below us the water gushed through an opened upper-sluice in a dense column of foam that leapt far out, struck the lower water, and leapt up again and again, rebounding from its own terrific impact with a force that shook the massive masonry beneath our feet and muffled our voices in its far-echoing roar, we came unannounced upon Hearson.

Unshaved, unwashed, in ragged vest that exposed his hairy arms and chest, he was directing the construction of a ceremonial lever with which the Royal Personage would formally open the Barrage. Pressing, at the appointed time, that ivory handle overlaid with beaten gold, His Royal Highness would thereby elevate, by an ingenious electrical device, a further section of the great upper-sluices and release the first mighty, controlled flow of the fertilising water.

It was, I think, the aspect of that illimitable expanse of captive power, shimmering in the heat-haze, mile upon endless mile away up towards the hills, united with the brain-confusing thunder of the falls and the raw, naked magnitude of the surroundings, that made us all keenly conscious of our puny, human insignificance; for the Governor, laying a hand on Hearson's arm, spoke with singular humility.

"I envy you, Hearson," said the distinguished old aristocrat, "I envy you most sincerely. We Governors strut our part on the gilded stage for a few years, go home, fume a little, perhaps, in the House of Lords, and are forgotten. But this work of yours will remain for all time. Mahdipur will blaze with your electric light, the Lohari Mines will hum with your electric power, and, better far than this," he pointed down the sun-scorched valley, "you'll have freed five million souls and their

descendants from the age-old spectre of drought." He turned and shook Hearson's hand. "I do congratulate you, Hearson, with all my heart."

Considering that without the Governor's most strenuous support Hearson could have never got his Barrage project through, I thought—in spite of his love trouble—he might have been a little more gracious about it. He merely grunted and continued to answer the Governor's questions, while we paced the whole length of the Barrage, in the most surly monosyllables. And it was not till the sun had set and we were retracing our steps to the car that the full and ghastly truth was revealed to me. Rollie and the Governor, a few yards ahead, were discussing some ceremonial detail of the State Opening, when Hearson clutched my arm.

"Jumbo, man," he whispered hoarsely, pointing to the dammed-up river, "can ye no hear her greetin'?"

But it wasn't the words—it was the expression on that haggard face, the awful red look that blazed in those eyes, that sent an ice-cold thrill of horror through my blood. For in that instant I saw that the thing I had vaguely feared, perhaps subconsciously expected, had happened at last. Hearson was mad—stark, staring mad—the long-strained barrier of his mind had broken down, completely, utterly broken down—and in its ruin . . .

I glanced panic-stricken at the murmuring mass of water—but Hearson was shaking me by the arm again.

"For a woman's sake I tied up Lopamudra, Jumbo. Listen! Can ye no hear her cryin' to me to let her free—cryin' that all the worrld's rotten and stinkin' o' sin for the lack of her? Look!" he dragged me to the upper edge and pointed to the little waves slapping and curling along the dam's granite wall, "can ye no see her little hands pluckin', pluckin', always pluckin' for the key? And her million eyes that gaze reproachful at me the nights lang, streamin' with sorrow for the sins of the worrld?"

He glared crazily at the dim reflection of the early evening stars, dancing, tear-blurred as it might be,

among the surface ripples; and then with a jarring laugh, he pulled himself together.

"I forrgot, ye'd no understand, Jumbo—a godless soldier. His Ex. is callin' ye to the car."

"Come along, boys, we're behind our time," said the Governor, climbing in. "Good-bye, Hearson, good-bye, good-bye!" And to Rollie as the car gathered speed, "A queer-mannered fellow! but I suppose that's the way of genius."

And I, at the back, with the awful menace of that madman in the darkling desolation behind us, and the lights of doomed, unconscious Mahdipur ahead, sat sweltering through the desert miles in a panic of nervous terror—counting the seconds till I could get Rollie alone and break to him the terrible news. And when, arrived back at Government House and, in his own quarters, I told him of Hearson's condition, repeating word for word the mad, wild words Hearson had uttered on the edge of the Barrage, Rollie, without answering a word, lifted the *chic* and called softly:

"Ohé, Muldoo!"

And when the old conjuror—known only to Rollie and me and three men up in Simla as the famous B121 of our Intelligence Service—had entered soft-foot and salaamed, Rollie enquired tersely:

"Who's Lopamudra?"

"Ah," the old Hindu looked closely at him, "the Sahib has already heard things? Lopamudra—does the Sahib not know?—was earth-born daughter to the God-head Brahma; and to purge the world from sin she assumed the form of a river—the Lohari River, Sahib. Only Lohari water, our people say, can cleanse the sins of men."

"H'm," commented Rollie, "that would seem to account for the form of Hearson's mania." Then to Muldoo again. "Have you heard aught fresh from the Barrage?"

Parchment-skinned, dark-eyed Muldoo, usually so imperturbable, fidgeted uneasily.

"Aye, Sahib," he said slowly, "things are not well.



In the night men see Hearson Sahib, standing high up on the dam against the stars, waving his arms and crying confusedly—crying aloud that the sins of the world are now upon *his* head, and crying to Lopamudra that she pardon the wrong he hath done her. And some say the spirit of the river comes up out of the flood and strives with him there upon the stonework. Aye, they have seen them there, the two, striving together high up in the starlight. And men are exceedingly afraid, and the villagers down in the valley hide in their houses, saying that Brahma is deep-angered at the violation of his daughter's purpose. The wrath of mighty Brahma is abroad, they say, and his wrath will surely fall upon the earth."

Absurd though this legendary superstition was, it struck on me with a nameless sense of dread.

"Rollie," I whispered, "we can't leave this maniac raving through the nights alone with the Barrage. God only knows what he may do!"

Rollie agreed, and I was immensely relieved when, after dismissing Muldoo, he decided to act at once.

"You'll answer for me here as Military Secretary, Jumbo," he said, "till after the State Opening of the Barrage. I'll fix it up with His Ex., on the grounds of seeing about the final arrangements out there. I'm off back *ek dam* to keep an eye on Hearson—in the exhilarating rôle," he grinned, "of a *mehtai-walla*, sweet-meat-seller, to the coolie camp; the same disguise, you remember, I used with some success in the Anandra Samaj affair."

It was the usual procedure for me, as Commandant of the Bodyguard, to act for Rollie when urgent occasions called him elsewhere; and so occupied was I with the Royal Personage's arrival, the processions through the loyally-decorated streets, banquets and receptions, and so rushed with the arrangements for conveying many thousands of spectators out to Lohari to witness the Opening of the Barrage, that I had little time to worry about Hearson's madness.

Since Rollie himself was out there, I told myself, there could now be nothing to worry about. And it was not

till the great day of the Opening itself, after the Royal Personage had driven through the cheering crowds—after I had seen him and nine special train-loads of spectators leave the station for Lohari, and I had returned, with a great load off my mind to Government House, that there befell the most devastating experience of my life.

“Thank the Lord it’s as good as over, now!” I sighed with inexpressible relief, falling into a chair in my quarters—for I had to remain in Mahdipur to superintend the return procession. And even while I smiled at my morbidly exaggerated fears of the past fortnight, the *chic* was flung wildly aside, and in rushed Muldoo in a state of frantic emotion. Never had I seen the old ruffian so badly scared.

“Sahib, Sahib!” he screamed. “The Barrage!—run to the telegraph and stop the *tamasha*—run, run, Sahib!”

“Great Scott, what’s up?” I fairly jumped out of my chair. “What the devil’s up, Muldoo?”

And for one ghastly moment after he had told me, my knees refused their office, and I sagged back into the chair shaking like a man with shell-shock.

“Sahib,” Muldoo had gasped, “even now a ganger from the dam, having run all night and half the day, has come to my house mad with terror, saying—saying —”

“Saying what, Muldoo?” I shouted, shaking him violently, for the old Hindu had broken off choking, as though he were going to have a fit.

“The B-b-arrage, Sahib,” he gasped, “ye know that even now the Royal Prince is about to press the lever that will open the water-gates?”

“Yes, yes,” I nodded quickly, “go on.”

“Last evening did Manu the ganger discover that Hearson Sahib—bewitched by Lopamudra, the Spirit of the River—hath secretly and during many nights placed with his own hands a great mine of dynamite in the core of the stonework—so that when the Sahib-zada presses the lever——”

"Good God!" I yelled, instantly visualising the maniac's awful reparation to Lopamudra, "the Barrage and everybody on it will be blown to smithereens!"

"Aye," Muldoo glanced fearfully northward, "and the water, Sahib—a mountain of rushing water"—he clutched me wildly round the knees—"haste, oh, haste, and telephone to Dennistoun Sahib!"

In less than two seconds I was shouting for the Lohari number; but the operator informed me—coolly unconscious of his imminent doom, of the imminent doom of Mahdipur—that the line was out of order.

Two more seconds and I had dashed into our private telegraph office. Same reply—the Lohari line, for some unknown reason, was not working. And understanding that Hearson, aware of Manu's discovery, had, with a madman's cunning, cut the wires in order to prevent any last moment interference with his diabolical immolation, I glanced frenziedly at the clock.

Only fifty-three minutes before the fatal lever was pressed! Fifty-three minutes, fifty-three eternal minutes, before the perpetration of that maniac horror more colossal than the destruction of Krakatoa, and—the sweat of anguish poured down my face—I was as helpless to stop that unimaginable, mind-staggering holocaust, as if there had only remained a single second.

"Fly thither, Sahib," Muldoo clawed at my knees in a paroxysm of terror, "fly thither in an air machine."

"By gad, of course! I might just do it in time!" And hardly were the words out of Muldoo's mouth, before I was in a car, racing through the now empty streets for the aerodrome. Dashing at seventy down the deserted Mall, I saw the solitary figure of Jane Bayne, placidly chawing an apple—too apathetic even to have gone out with the rest of Mahdipur to the great spectacle of the Opening—suet-faced, suet-minded plain Jane Bayne, the cause of . . .

Imagination recoiled in horror from picturing *what* she was the cause of. By the special mercy of Providence a machine was just going up as I roared on to the aerodrome, and pulled up with a crash of

brakes and a twenty-foot lock-skid alongside the fighting plane.

"Hi!" I yelled at the youthful pilot whose face was new to me, as I sprang with one bound into the observer's seat, "go like the flames of Hell for the Barrage!"

"The Barrage?" he stared at me astonished. "But—but, my dear fellow, there's no landing there—nothing but murderous rocks—and who the blazes are you, anyhow?"

"Get on, blast you!" I shouted, and my appearance must have conveyed the urgency of the situation, for the boy hesitated no longer. "Switch on! Contact!" he shouted instantly, as though infected by my own consuming frenzy; the mechanics swung the propeller, stood away as it roared into action; the little machine bumped violently over the uneven *pat*, soared up, and was speeding like an arrow for the fateful scene.

That century-long passage in the air was the most harrowing any man has yet had to live through. Could we get there in time? If so, could we land on the rocky plain without crashing? These were the questions on which depended that which my reeling mind strove desperately not to contemplate.

But as, craning over the fusilage against the furious windrush, while the earth swirled map-wise below, I saw first the far-off, baneful glimmer of the hundred mile reservoir; and then, rushing up out of the distance into sharper definition, the great dam itself, lying like an unsubstantial shadow of hope between that expanse of concentrated, potential destruction, and the broad, doomed valley below; and as, finally, it loomed up clearer and clearer, and I saw the dense black mass—thick as flies in sugar-harvest—of the spectators upon the work itself, and in the temporary enclosures at the ends of the work—as beholding them, I glanced at my wrist watch, and saw that there was a bare seven minutes to go before they were hurled skyward into eternity by the explosion, or annihilated with all the plain in the first cataract of the bursting waters, I yelled again like a lunatic at the pilot.

"Faster, man, for God's sake, faster! And land close up at the Barrage!"

But he had already chosen his place, this stout-hearted lad, and a moment later we were nose-diving dizzily for a small sandy patch at the east end of the Barrage. At the last moment he straightened up, we took earth, ploughed a few yards through the foot-deep sand; and then, striking a submerged rock, the 'plane somersaulted completely end over and pitched us headlong a clear score yards in front.

Sick and giddy from the impact, not even looking to see how it had fared with the pilot, I picked myself up and started off at a staggering run for the Barrage a couple of hundred yards ahead—a despairing, light-headed race against the doomful seconds.

Only four and a half minutes to go. . . .

I must have been pretty badly concussed by the crash, for I have only a hazy recollection of fighting my way like a maniac through the outer enclosures; a hazy recollection of pushing ladies roughly aside, of astonished faces and angry questions that I neither heard nor heeded; of a bayonet-gleaming sentry who tried to stop me at the entrance on to the Barrage itself; of a vista of red carpet, red and gold boundary ropes, of many and glittering uniforms, glittering band instruments, and guards of honour. Finally a blurred memory of the Governor and his staff standing a little behind the tall, white-haired Royalty whose pleasant voice was drawing to the peroration of his speech—but an eternally vivid and terrible recollection of Hearson, standing on the Governor's right, unusually smart and well-groomed—wearing that unearthly, ecstatic expression you see only in the old paintings of the Christian martyrs. And as, fervently thanking heaven that I was after all in time, I cried out with all the strength of my labouring breath, a foot neatly tripped me up and I was aware of Tiny Martin, sixteen stone Superintendent of Police, sitting on my chest.

"Shut up, Jumbo, you fool," he growled. "Are you drunk, man? You're spoiling the whole show!"

And while, fighting like one possessed of a hundred devils, I tried to shout to the Duke to hold, Tiny with a muttered oath rammed his handkerchief down my throat and signalled a couple of his assistants to hold me down.

“Is anyone ill?”

I heard the Royal Personage pause in his speech to ask what all the commotion was about; and while I struggled with my last ounce of strength, struggled till the blood pumped burstingly in my brain, to scream out the terrible message I had risked all to bring, I heard the word passed quietly up that it was only a man gone down with a slight touch of the sun.

Held, gagged, powerless, the only living soul who could now avert cataclysm unimaginable, I knew it striding on with every second. With one last paroxysm of despair I heaved and strained till every bone and sinew in my body seemed to crack, but I was helpless in the strong grip of my custodians, helpless as an infant in the hug of a bear, and the Duke began the closing passages of his speech.

“It is now my proud privilege,” he spoke in impressive tones, “to declare open in the name of the British people, this great monument to the genius and humanity of the British people.”

Exhausted now, stark-paralysed with horror, I saw him, between the group of officials, step forward; heard the quick, hushed sigh of expectation from the doomed onlookers, that greeted this dramatic moment; saw the mad, fanatical exultation flame up in Hearson’s red-blazing eyes; saw the Duke, amid a breathless, pregnant silence, lay his hand on that gold and ivory lever.

I shut my eyes. For myself, I say it without conceit, I had no fear. When a man has fought from first to last through the War, he is, for ever after, on familiar terms with Death.

But it was the realisation of what the next second must bring forth, that roaring tumult of deluge and destruction, which, as Hearson had said, would eclipse the awful ruin of Krakatoa itself—it was an appalling

mind-vision of *that*, that capsized my senses, convulsed me body and soul, in racking, unendurable torment.

The Duke grasped the lever—began to press. . . .

Fire, red fire, blinding, prodigious—fire that split into a myriad, myriad dancing, whirling sparks, roared in my brain; noise intolerable, noise of mighty rushing waters, loud-thundered through the universe; agony, sharp-piercing, brain-throbbing agony, of parting soul and body—and I was floating through the realms of space, floating, dreamless, in Nirvana.

"Coming round, old lad? Good. You must keep quiet for a bit, though."

"Where am I?" I faltered confusedly, at the sound of Rollie's voice.

"Not in heaven this time!" he grinned. "You've slept the clock round, here, in the Lohari power-house."

"But—but—the Barrage?"

"I thought I told you to keep quiet." Rollie, cool, smiling, immaculately arrayed in a chaste lounge suit, firmly pushed me back on to the bed. "If you hadn't had the thickest head in India, Jumbo, that crash out of the 'plane would have broken it. Your pilot won't be out of hospital for a month, and it's a marvel how you managed to make such a shocking disturbance. His Ex. nearly had a fit! No, keep quiet, and listen to me," he added more seriously, as I tried to speak again. "I suppose old Muldoo got wind of Hearson's amiable scheme for blowing us to eternity? Ah, I thought so. Well, a certain odoriferous sweetmeat-seller here wasn't long in spotting it either! I soon discovered that Hearson had packed several tons of blasting dynamite in the central compression chamber—and as soon as Hearson departed to the siding to receive Their Nib's train, I—I just disconnected the dynamite and connected up the lever with the original sluices again!"

"So, so," I said slowly, and rather foolishly, when my still splitting head had grasped all this, "there was no explosion?"

Rollie laughed and shook his head.

"No, fathead—you just fainted from funk and concussion."

"And what about Hearson?"

"Poor devil! when the lever functioned sweetly according to programme, amid cheering and music, he gave a wild yell and fell down in a fit. Pat's sending him home in the next hospital ship."

"I—I think," I murmured weakly, "I'll go to sleep for another forty-eight hours."

It must have been a year later that we saw the engagement of James Forbes Hearson, C.S.I., P.W.D., to Annie Flora Simpson, spinster, of Aberdeen.

"Ah," chuckled Pat Heffernan, when we showed him the announcement, "there's nothin' like inoculatin' a disease wid its own virus. That's the one thing that'll make a *pukka* cure of poor old Jock!"



## THE STRATAGEM

I FLATTERED myself that they made a pretty good show, those hundred and fifty tall warriors of my Bodyguard—resplendent in scarlet and gold and big shiny boots, with the sun just glancing on their pennoned lance points—as they clattered through Mahdipur, escorting His Excellency the Governor to the State Opening of Council.

And when on the polo ground that afternoon Mina Gellibrand chaffed me a trifle acidly for being a painted toy soldier, and the Commandant of a box of painted toy soldiers, I just grinned—because I knew she yearned for her fiancé, old Bob Haviland of the Police, who, for the heinous offence of being more efficient than most, was just then languishing in a God-forsaken mud-heap of a post called Subhan Khwar, that lay some nineteen and three-quarter miles east-north-east of Mahdipur.

“Once upon a time there was a War, Mina,” I retorted laughing, for I rather liked the little thing, “in which those lads of mine were somewhat concerned. But *that* is a thing which you are too young to understand ! ”

And as I laughed again I little thought—nor for the matter of that did pretty little Mina—that before many more hours had passed over her golden head, those same painted toy soldiers of mine would have been involved in as brisk a little affair as anything in the late International Unpleasantness—indeed, in a piece of business so grim that Mina will remember it till long after those golden locks of hers have turned to silver.

For she, too, slender little slip of girlhood as she was, was destined to be caught up in that sudden and terrible whirl of events that already hung darkly over us, even as we bantered there over our tea in the Grand Stand. Was destined, moreover, to be transformed in the space

of a few awful hours, from a rather frivolous little maiden into a big, great-hearted woman.

No sooner had I got back to Government House than I saw something was in the wind. Orderlies were dashing about in all directions; *babus* were jabbering like the monkey house at the Zoo; and Rollie's *chapprassi* came running to meet me before I had time to get off my pony, saying that the Governor wished to see me at once.

As I hurried in to his private office I could see that His Ex. too, though usually so imperturbable, was in a highly explosive state. His bushy grey eyebrows stood straight out, and even the carnations in his inevitable buttonhole seemed to bristle with anger and resolution. As I entered he brought his fist down on the table with a mighty crash.

"The Law shall be enforced!" he shouted fiercely. "As long as I am Governor of this Province the meanest sweeper shall be free to go about his lawful business, and if anyone *dares* interfere with him—by God!"—crash on the table again—"they shall answer for it to me!"

"Quite so, sir," I murmured, and "Stuff to give 'em!" I added to myself under my breath; for we all loved that robust old sportsman, and the way he ever stood like a rock for the thing that is Right, respecting neither colour nor creed nor class. You felt somehow that you saw in him a raw chunk of old England; with little foibles, perhaps, such as that extra glass of port at dinner sometimes—but withal ruggedly great.

"Quite so, sir," I murmured again, wondering nevertheless what on earth all this to-do was about, when His Ex. turned sharply to Rollie, who stood beside his chair wearing that dreamy, far-away expression that I had come to know was a sure sign of big things afoot.

"Tell him, Rollie," he barked. "That is, as much as his thick head can understand."

Very briefly, while the Governor tugged at his moustache and made ferocious noises, and glared from one to the other of us, Rollie explained that, as the result of a notorious agitator's activities, the village of Michni—which is the village next this side of Subhan Khwar, where Bob Haviland was posted—had completely run

*amok*, beating to death an unfortunate *bania* to whom most of them owed money, and were now, according to the latest report, proceeding to burn the houses of ex-soldiers and other loyalists. "Hold on, though," he said, as the telephone suddenly tinkled. "Yes, yes, Rollie speaking—that you, Bob? Haviland on the line, sir." Then to me, "Take a message, Jumbo."

My blood began to boil as I wrote down the words calmly spoken by that solitary white man nearly twenty miles away—isolated in the heart of a disaffected district. The message ran :—

"Subadar of Michni Detachment reports that police made vigorous effort to restore order, but were attacked by overwhelming numbers and driven back with some casualties into the Police Post, which is now being assaulted. Excitement also rising here in Subhan Khwar. Am preparing to——"

There was a despairing buzz and crackle in the receiver, followed by cold silence.

"H'm," said Rollie quietly, "they've cut the wire !"

In the moment of pregnant silence that followed there flitted through my mind the picture of one little handful of native police fighting for their lives against a fanatical mob of their own race, yet holding by the simple faith of the Sahibs who had trained them, that, in such matters, honour is a higher thing than life. And as I thought of this, and what might now also be happening to old Bob at Subhan Khwar, I nearly cried aloud in my impatience that the vital moments were passing. The same thought had struck the Governor; and although his eyebrows stood out another inch, he suddenly grew as calm as Rollie.

"Thank God," he said, "I had young Haviland sent to Subhan Khwar. If anyone can handle the situation, he's the man." He swung round in his chair. "Now look here, boys, the troops as you know, are all away at the Pindi manœuvres, and there are no aeroplanes nearer than Risalpur—and in any case they couldn't operate till daylight, while every second is vital to those poor fellows now." He suddenly glared at me. "Rollie suggests

you and he taking ten picked men of the Bodyguard out in a light tender—while the remainder follow on mounted as quick as possible under the Adjutant. How's that strike you, Jumbo? "

I said briefly and emphatically that it struck me as the only possible thing to do—although I was afraid that no tender, or any other sort of car, could get very far along the deeply-rutted, semi-desert track to Michni—especially as it would be very dark in another hour—but that we'd do our very damndest. And as I swung on my heel to go and turn out the men, His Excellency shouted after me : " Tell 'em to saddle up Turk ! "

I paused and caught Rollie's eye. So the old man meant to come himself ! Of course, we knew that in the now-almost-forgotten South African War he had led a squadron of Yeomanry to the relief of Ladysmith. Indeed, he was somewhat prone—after that extra glass of port—to show us, manœuvring salt cellars and dessert knives, exactly how he had won that war. But apart from the unconstitutionality of it, this twenty mile ride through the dark with God knows what at the end of it, was no place for a Grandfather—and I suppose my face must have betrayed my thoughts, for he thumped on the table and roared at me, " Damme, boy, d'you think I'm going to sit here while half a dozen miserable natives are showing the Empire how gentlemen can die? Get a move on ! "

I moved accordingly; and when I had given the necessary orders to Hubert Vernon, my Adjutant, and hurried back to my quarters to get into uniform, I found Rollie there, already in full war paint, earnestly talking to old Muldoo the Conjuror—old Muldoo, to whom the Select Few in Simla refer always by the cryptic symbol B. 121.

" I've countermanded Turk ! " he said with a twinkle in his eye, as I entered. " But the old man needed a devil of a lot of dissuading." Then, indicating Muldoo, his voice grew very grave, and he said to me in a low voice : " Muldoo tells me this is no ordinary *bania*-baiting rumpus. He's convinced it's part of a far-reaching plan of revolt that's been fomenting ever since Krishnavarna visited the Province.

"Happily they can never co-ordinate, these unloving Aryan Brothers of ours, but once the flame started, it *might* spread like wild-fire till——" he broke off with an eloquent gesture. Then, clapping me on the back, he added, "But why speculate on unpleasant possibilities, since we're going to stamp the spark right out to-night." And the well-known, lazy grin spread over his face. "Only breathe not one little word of this, Jumbo—lest there be an unparalleled getting up of the wind in all quarters!"

Having exhorted Hubert Vernon for the last time to bring on the mounted main body with all possible speed, we were clambering into the front seat of the now ready tender, with its ten picked stalwarts aboard, when a little figure in riding kit slid up and laid a tremulous hand on Rollie's arm. And with Bob Haviland's message, cut off slap in the middle, and the thought of what that might mean still running in my mind, I felt far from happy when I saw that the figure was Mina's.

"Oh, do let me come with you, Rollie," she pleaded. "I've just tried to telephone to him and the line's cut—and I *know* he's in dreadful danger!"

Of course Rollie had to refuse, though he did his best to reassure and comfort her; and when she began to cry, I felt annoyed, for this was waste of time, and women have no business in affairs of this sort.

"It's all right, little lady," said Rollie, as he let in the clutch. "We're just going to breakfast with Bob, that's all—and if it's a *good* breakfast, we'll give him your love!"

It was, we knew, a case of neck or nothing—of taking every risk—and we shoved that old Ford tender along as she had never moved before, jolting and bumping over the wretched apology of a track till our teeth rattled in our skulls. And as the sun shot down behind the ragged hills and the scrub and boulder-dotted expanse around us grew greyer and more drear, my mind was haunted by that last glimpse of little Mina's face—agonised for the man she loved.

How fared it with old Bob? And with that other and nearer little detachment? Try as I would to keep them

out, these thoughts hammered and hammered through my brain throughout the eternity of that nightmare drive; during which it seemed to my impatient mind there was time for the whole world to have been massacred ten times over.

Suddenly, as we topped Pirbala rise and came in sight of Michni, we saw a great tongue of fire that leaped and roared against the sky; and a groan burst from us all—Rollie and me and the ten bearded stalwarts craning out of the tender—for we knew without speaking it, that it was the Police Post which those hungry flames were devouring.

And the next instant a dreadful apparition with hair and beard and ragged clothes all ablaze, tottered, screaming, into the beam of our headlights. And even as Rollie jambed on the brakes, Risaldar Karim Buksh sprang from the tender with a great shout and enveloped the burning man in his cloak, thereby extinguishing the fire that was consuming him alive.

“By Allah!” cried the grizzled old Risaldar, who had fought from Kumassi to Cambrai, “’tis Nathu—my own father’s brother’s son, that was *naik* in the Police.” And the old Punjabi shook his fist towards the conflagration, roaring out dreadful threats of vengeance—threats that were to be more than fulfilled before the dawn.

In a trice we had gathered round, gazing with pity into that ghastly face; bending low to catch the last words that issued in a broken whisper from those hell-tortured lips. And as we listened I heard Rollie’s jaws snap like a vice of steel; and into my own slower brain there slowly mounted the red mist of murder.

And when our dark-bearded warriors, their eyes fiercely gleaming in the flickering light of the flames ahead, had heard the moan-broken story of that writhing thing upon the ground; the story of how, after three hours’ stubborn defence, the detachment had been lured out with promises of truce with honour; and of how then the rebels had shot them down, killing all save Nathu—who had dropped, shamming dead—and then, having poured oil over their bodies, had set them ablaze—there

rose such a deep-throated roar of anger from our men as I hope never to hear the like of again.

And as the death rattle came into the dying man's throat, he gasped out that, drunk with *haksish* and blood, the rebels had started out for Subhan Khwar, swearing to do likewise with the Police Post there—and more especially with the Sahib who commanded it; and with his last breath he urged us to hurry, lest it be too late.

“Good God! Old Bob!” I exclaimed involuntarily.

“We'll save them yet!” shouted Rollie, as the men cried aloud to him that they should purge their souls of the outrage they had seen. For, as all the world knows, death is nothing to the Mussulman, but the violation of his body after death is a sacrilege unspeakable; for is it not written in the Holy Koran that as a man dies, in that same shape goes he to Paradise? And what chance of favour have the maimed among the Houris that await each faithful warrior there?

“I wouldn't care to be the enemy that comes up against these lads to-night,” Rollie whispered to me. “But all the same, it's going to be a ticklish business if young Hubert doesn't come along mighty quick with the main body.”

While I was calculating for the hundredth time exactly how long it would take Hubert to catch us up in that dark night, we jolted up to the flaming Police Post.

There are some sights it is better to forget, even if one has been from first to last through something of a War—and that Police Post was one of them. The stench of burning flesh turned us sick, and in the fitful glare of the flames we saw the huddled heap of oil-saturated corpses, still guttering, where they had been shot down as they had come unsuspectingly out of the Post—the flesh charred and consumed till the entrails flowed, and where the semblance of a human face remained, the expression on it was such as I can still hardly bear to think of.

But nowhere was there a rebel in sight. They had gone in a body, even as dead Nathu had said, to make sport with another little band of His Majesty's servants.

As Rollie shoved the old Ford along for all she was

worth, and the men urged him to go yet faster—though the radiator boiled furiously, and scarce more than one wheel at a time held the deep-rutted track with the reeling pace of it—he spoke earnestly in my ear.

“It’s barely two miles on to Subhan Khwar, Jumbo, but—the Lohari’s in flood!”

“Well?” I returned, not catching the drift of his remark. “If the ford’s too high, there’s the bridge.”

For at this season, when the river—just across which stood the Subhan Khwar Police Post—was in flood, there was always a narrow rope suspension bridge for foot traffic.

“I hope you’re right, Jumbo,” he said quietly, “but they could hardly have been such fools as not to have cut the bridge.”

“Good God!” I exclaimed, horror-struck. “I never thought of that. If they have, we’re helpless.”

“*Somehow* we’re going to save Bob, and those other poor devils,” he said; and he did not speak again till the rush of the river came to our ears, and its swollen face glimmered muddily under the spangled sky.

“Not wishing to advertise our arrival, we’ll leave the bus under this bank,” Rollie said, and gave a low-voiced order to the men. And as we crept up the bank to where the bridge-posts loomed gauntly, a good sound struck on our ears, which was nothing less than the steady crackle of rifle fire from the Post just over the river.

“Thank God, they’re still holding out,” muttered Rollie. But our joy was damped when we found that the rope bridge sagged down limply into the boiling flood.

“Cut!” I groaned, “and we’re utterly useless on this side of the river.”

Peering over the bank there, under the wonderful Indian starlight, we could just make out the shadowy outline of the Post, sharply punctuated at intervals by little spurts of flame as the rifles spoke, and the answering spurts that played like fireflies about the formless scrub as the attackers replied. And above the crack of the rifles and the howling of the mob we heard ever and anon another sound—a sinister sound, which we recognised as the creaking of lumbering wheels.



" Ah ! " muttered Rollie, " creeping up under cover of hay-filled ox-wagons. When they've pushed 'em up close, they'll set 'em alight and fire the Post. There's not a moment to lose."

Meanwhile, old Risaldar Karim Buksh, who had been peering into the gloom with those eyes of his that were like a cat's eyes, now called our attention to a very significant fact.

" Sahib," he whispered excitedly, " the bridge is not cut. Else how would the people of Michni return home? Only the windlass has been loosed, lowering it into the water, and giving it, in this light, the semblance of being cut. It needs but a few turns of the handle to tauten it into place again."

" But the effect is the same," I groaned, " for as it is, no one can cross over."

" By gad, we might have guessed that ! " said Rollie, with a queer thrill in his voice. " We'll do the trick after all ! "

And before I realised what he meant he was already half undressed.

" Good Lord, man," I entreated, " this is sheer suicide ! No one could hope to live in that torrent."

But Rollie grinned under the stars. " I'm a conceited sort of ass, Jumbo, and what Harry Burlton did in 1922 for a bet I believe I can do now for business. The current sweeps straight under this bank across to the Subhan bend, about three hundred yards down on the other side. You see," he added, laughing at my distressed face, " it's the only, only way ! "

And when I looked over the river at the vicious flashes squirting out of the darkness around the Post, where a handful of brave men were making their last stand, I realised that old Rollie was—as he always was—entirely right; and I began to undress too. But he quickly stopped me.

" No, Jumbo, you're the world's worst swimmer—and you're needed here. Send back the tender bells to meet and bring on another load of Hubert's men; and as soon as I wind up the bridge, come across with this lot—not forgetting to bring my toilette ! "

Then, wrapping his automatic carefully in a strip of mackintosh, he crammed it well down over his head in his cap. "It's on the cards I may have to exchange courtesies with a sentry or two at the other end of the bridge," he grinned; and patting me on the back, while I lay speechless, he slipped into the turgid flood.

I suppose really it was only a few minutes, but I shall never know how that time passed. While the battle raged on the further shore and the yelling of the attackers grew fiercer and more blood-thirsty, my eyes were straining, straining on the swirling stream—my mind picturing horribly all the dangers of the snakes, the deadly crocodiles, the uprooted trees that roll and bobble seaward when the Lohari is in flood.

And yet I knew that he was happy—old Rollie, whom I loved passing the love of women—that strange, gentle friend of mine, who believed that Life was a thing of no account unless it was lived splendidly; and whose greatest joy was in taking on jobs the mere thought of which set the average man quaking in his shoes. And suddenly my heart bounded with delight when Karim Buksh—peering, like me, under his hand—exclaimed rapturously that Rollie had reached the Subhan bend.

"See, Sahib," he whispered joyously, pointing into the gloom of the opposite shore, "the Major Sahib runs swiftly under the bank!"

No sooner had I passed a word of warning to my nine men—one had taken the tender back to meet Hubert—than there were a couple of flashes, followed by a double report at the other end of the bridge—almost drowned, however, by the shouting and the tumult around the Post itself; and a few moments later a happy little sigh went up from us as the bridge was seen to be slowly rising.

"He has slain the enemy's watchers," gurgled Karim Buksh ecstatically. "Never was there a Sahib like our Major Sahib!"

In less than five minutes I handed Rollie his clothes, while we crouched under cover of the opposite bank, just above where two brown corpses lay face downwards, dark-staining the mud.

"I've known calmer passages," he laughed, in answer

to my anxious enquiries; and then, while he dressed, and we kept the eager men well down under the bank, Rollie and I spied over the top, forming our plan of action.

The Post, the usual loop-holed, square, brick-and-mud built structure of the Frontier type, stood out in the open plain a hundred and fifty yards in front of us. A little to the west of it was a dark thicket of palms and rough jungle, affording ample cover to the attackers.

Although the bulk of the enemy were still in the main thicket—as their uncouth yelling and the continual blaze along its edge attested—yet a number of bolder spirits had worked up through the shadows and behind the country carts pushed before them to those nearer blobs of cover—some even within a few yards of the Post's main gateway.

"Shall we also do a little firing, Major Sahib?" Karim Buksh asked sweetly, caressing the trigger of his rifle. But Rollie shook his head and whispered to me.

"Not yet, Jumbo. There must be anything up to three hundred of them, and if they rushed us and cut the bridge—good-bye to old Bob and Co.!"

I nodded, and he went on. "You see," he added in a cold, steely voice, "after what old Muldoo told us, and more especially after what we saw at Michni, I'm anxious to make a proper job of this."

I entirely agreed, for up to date the defence showed no signs of boredom, and though it was hard for the defenders to be given no hint that friends were at hand, I fully understood the necessity of waiting till we could make certain, not only of avenging the horrors of Michni, but—what was more important still—of stamping out this first spark which might otherwise flame into an unpleasantly widespread conflagration. And while I reflected upon this there came a sudden lull in the ragged crackle of musketry, and a great voice bellowed from the nearest palm-clump.

"Listen, Sahib," whispered Karim Buksh, gripping my arm, "Bela Singh speaks—the leader of the rebels."

And as the treacherous words hurtled through the night, our hearts stood still, thinking of the fate of

Michni—and our own plight too, if the lying promises were believed.

“Ye have fought as brave men fight,” boomed the voice, “but what hope have ye in the end against so many? Surrender up your arms and ye shall go free. On the honour of Bela Singh I say it.” And a great, echoing shout arose from all the shadows. “Aye, but surrender up your arms and ye go free.”

In the silence that fell I heard my men catch their breath in painful tension, waiting for the reply. Only a slight smile curled Rollie’s upper lip; he and I well knowing what the manner of that reply would be—for Bob Haviland, you see, happened to be that very common but all the same rather wonderful thing, an average Briton. And when in the expectant silence his reply did ring out, through a loop-hole in the Post, it was a laugh—a long, hearty laugh of genuine amusement, so infectious that Rollie and I chuckled too.

“Does the lion render up his claws to the jackal?” he shouted mockingly; and again the amused laughter echoed out from the hollow interior of the Post—this laughter of the young betrothed man who in his heart believed he had about as much chance of succour as a snowball in hell.

“Good old Bob!” I murmured, as a savage yell of fury greeted this contemptuous reply. And Bela Singh’s voice, shaking with passion—above all things Orientals cannot abide ridicule—roared again through the night telling Bob Haviland in unspeakable detail exactly what tortures they would put his body to when they had caught him.

And as the last horrible threat died away, Bob’s laughter mocked it even more lightly than before; whereupon, the rifles blazed again, and the angry bullets smacked great slabs of mud off the Post’s sun-baked wall; and I glanced at my watch, praying with fervour that young Hubert might perform miracles in the matter of getting here before the hour we had calculated—which was still forty-three minutes distant.

A sharp hissing “Ah!” from our men made me look up quickly from my watch, and what I saw was not en-

couraging. Where all before had been half-darkness and shadow, broken only by points of flame as the rifles spoke, had now of a sudden become a lurid lake of light. They had thrown a torch into one of the hay-piled country carts, and in the surrounding gloom, doubly deepened by the blinding glare and smoke that flared up in front of the Post, men on all sides began to light oil-soaked torches and hurl them at the Post.

Never shall I forget that scene—the quivering, darting pillar of flame in front of the Post; the air alive with spluttering torches, and here and there amid the red glare, glimpses of vague shapes and shadowy figures like fiends in the *Inferno*—and still, in spite of the bewildering glare, the steady fire from the Post.

Suddenly Rollie gripped my shoulder as a shout of triumph proclaimed that a torch, having landed on the flat roof of the Post, had caught a hold—as the fast-spreading cresset too plainly showed. “There’s the beginning of the end, Jumbo,” he said. “How much more time to go?”

“They can’t get here for another forty minutes,” I answered as calmly as I could.

For answer he slipped off his coat and began to roll up his shirt sleeves. “They’ll be burned out of the Post in five minutes,” he said, “and as they bolt, the rebels will rush them *en masse*, lest they escape into the darkness of the jungle.”

“At which moment,” I queried, “we join the rush?”

Rollie nodded, and old Karim Buksh loosed his sword ever so slightly in the scabbard. “Great is Allah—who honours us here as *men*!” he growled in his beard, referring to the hopeless odds, and the others muttered “Aye”; well understanding the implication that the honour was the honour of Valhalla.

Another exultant yell arose as the whole summit of the Post suddenly leaped up in a roaring column of fire; and from the thicket a crowd of shadowy figures surged like spectres towards the iron-studded door. And then, knowing that the moment had come, Rollie put his hands to his mouth trumpet-fashion, and let out a ringing holloa—that old, old, glorious cry that even in the midst of this

awful drama, recalled the peaceful winter woodlands of home.

“Tally-ho, tally-ho, tally-ho-ho-ho, Bob-oh-oh-oh!”

A sudden startled silence fell as the full-throated view-holloa swelled out above the scene of blood and quavered far and far away into the immensity of the stars; and in that momentary hush there came like an echo out of the void:—

“Who-o-oo-ooop! gone aw-a-a-aaay!” as Bob and his handful of men dashed out through the veil of smoke and blazing flame. And as they appeared there rose one great snarling blood-cry, as when the pack runs its quarry into view; and every clump and boulder seemed to spring to life as the mob of shadowy spectres rolled in upon them.

Silently Rollie gripped my hand. “Good hunting, old boy,” he whispered, and I knew that in those words so lightly spoken the great-hearted sportsman believed that he was bidding me good-bye—for, as has been said, the odds were entirely hopeless.

“Now!” he cried, and shouting a wild war-cry we rushed headlong down the sloping bank and flung ourselves desperately on to the flank of the onslaught.

For a moment the surprise and the impetus of our charge staggered the swarming rebels, and they gave back, while, joining forces with Bob’s lot, we pressed this temporary advantage desperately. But the crafty Bela Singh was quick to gauge the situation.

“They be but a handful,” he bawled contemptuously to his wavering followers. “Fall to and slay them, my brothers.”

And rallied by their leader’s power, they returned again with blood-thirsty shouts to the attack.

One way and another I have been in many scraps in my time, but that one, under the stars and in and out of the shadows of the blazing Post, was the cream of them all. Rifles were useless, since friend and foe were mixed in one wild-heaving mêlée; and for the most part the work was in-work with the knife—which our men snatched up from the dead around them—though at the start Rollie and I got in useful effects with our automatic

pistols, wasting no shot except on certainties. And thus, for long moments that seemed like hours, men slew each other with deep gasps, and choking coughs, and groaning of accoutrements against strained bodies.

But in such affairs numbers must tell in the end; and when more than half our little band was down, and all of us wounded, including old Karim Buksh—still panting out encouragement from under a grisly heap of slain—and the enemy rallied for what we knew must be the last rush, there suddenly blared out above the fury of the fray the sweetest music I have ever heard. It was a cavalry trumpet sounding the charge. And to us cheering hoarsely, there came an answering cheer from the river bank.

Panic-stricken at the significance of that rousing trumpet-call, the enemy wavered and broke before this new charge. But my heart sank when I saw that it was merely another tender-load of men, such as ours, headed by a slight little ghost I could not recognise.

“Follow them up,” roared Rollie, likewise taking in the situation, “it’s now or never!”

And we drove them headlong back to the palm-thicket—and held them there another ten minutes, before Bela Singh could rally his broken following.

“Ye dogs and sons of dogs,” he bellowed wrathfully, “do ye run from another handful of Mussulman pigs—led by a woman?”

And as, shamefaced, they gathered thickly in the grove for what must now certainly have been the end, there came this time, as though in mockery of Bela Singh’s exhortation, a mighty roar that was unmistakably the voice of our salvation.

“*Allah il’al la! Himat i mardan!*”

“Saved by God!” yelled Bob Haviland, as young Hubert crashed down into the grove at the head of my hundred-odd lather-splashed braves, whom the rebels waited not to receive, but, scattering, fled incontinently toward the shadow of the hills.

“Good lad, Hughie!” I cried, smiting him on the back with my gory palm. “We didn’t think you could possibly do it inside another ten minutes.”

"'Fraid I've broken down half the horses," he laughed. Then turning to Mina. "But here's the one that really saved you. She's a bally little blue-eyed heroine!"

"What the devil are *you* doing here?" I gaped in astonishment, staring at a trembling, white-faced little figure in khaki riding kit.

"Shut up, Jumbo!" growled Rollie, as she burst into an uncontrollable fit of sobbing, while Hubert explained how she had ridden furiously after the Bodyguard and insisted upon going ahead with the second party in the tender—taking a trumpeter with her. He chuckled. "A deuced smart trick that, what?"

"I knew Bobbie was in danger," sobbed Mina, "and a voice whispered to me that *that* was the one way to save him." Then to me, "I'm sorry, Jumbo, I said horrid things about your toy soldiers."

And while I stood foolishly, not somehow able to answer for the lump in my throat, Rollie, carefully wiping the blood from his right hand, lifted hers to his lips and said very gravely:

"Little lady, apart from the trifling matter of *our* lives, I fancy England owes you a lot to-night."

It was ever his way to be thinking of the bigger thing—the far-reaching consequences that would assuredly have been, had not this first spark been utterly extinguished in the beginning—mainly through the wisdom, valour and resource of one small slip of a golden-headed little girl.

And as old Bob drew her to him with that light in his eyes that God had not put there for foolish bachelors to gape at, Rollie took Hubert and me by the arm and led us away to sort out that field of pain and carnage over which Love the Conqueror now reigned supreme.

It was a month and thirteen days later that I once more clattered through the streets of Mahdipur at the head of my box of painted toy soldiers—shining with the last word of spit and polish from spur to shoulder chain. But this time we were bound, not to an opening of Council, but for the Cathedral, whose bells pealed



merrily; and beside His Excellency the Governor sat little Mina Gellibrand, arrayed in a dream of white and silver; for when it was known that her uncle was down with fever, Lord Bellingdon had himself insisted on giving the bride away.

And as she looked up at me with shining eyes, I knew she was thinking no more of my toy soldiers, but of old Bob Haviland, with the new Kaiser-i-Hind medal on his breast, whom at that very moment Rollie was upbraiding for a miserable coward, and adjuring for mercy's sake to quit the vestry and stand before the altar like a man.

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## THE DEATH DOORS OF LANDHI

GIRLS, extraordinarily pretty and attractive girls, who can't make up their minds between two men, ought not to be allowed at large; they should be prohibited by the police, proscribed, and suitably dealt with under a very special clause of the Criminal Code.

At least, so I thought during those ghastly hours amid the fleshless corpses of Landhi, where Joy Hanbury had wrought such appalling havoc in two men's souls—to the peril of their salvation and the detriment of the Empire's work. Later, after the storming of the dread Death Doors of Landhi, I reversed my opinion somewhat—but I am running on too fast.

The climate, no doubt, was partly to blame for what occurred. The rains had failed; outside, the yellow-brown lawns gaped in great thirsty cracks to the brazen sky. Famine was already abroad, and the spectre of Plague was throwing his grisly shadow over a tortured land. Our staff at Government House, from the Governor downwards, lay under a boding oppression—and nerve-fretted men were becoming markedly impolite on slight occasion—except Rollie Dennistoun, of course, whom neither the heat, battle, nor murder, plague, pestilence nor feminine, could ruffle for one instant out of his cool-drawling composure.

And when, after a perfect purgatory of a night, I was aroused at an unholy hour to behold his slender, silk-pyjamaed figure regarding me with large humorous eyes from the end of the bed—when, I say, I made out through a sickly cloud of liver spots this at-all-other-times my bestest friend, whose cold-blooded daring had won him a reputation beyond the legendary of Bayard, I addressed

him with such rudeness as I could on the spur of the moment command.

"If your conscience won't let *you* sleep," I concluded acidly, after a few choice verbal bouquets, "that's no reason for breaking the beauty sleep of those who can. Go away, Rollie, I don't like your face."

Rollie lounged onto the foot of the bed with a grin.

"You shouldn't do it, Jumbo," he said, shaking his head. "Never mix bubbly and port; it takes the bloom off the complexion. The ladies won't love you no more." Reaching for a cigarette from the bedside table, he suddenly dropped his bantering tone. "Look here, old lad," he went on seriously, "I'm afraid there's going to be the devil's own bust-up. Hair, blood and toe-nails."

"Oh?" I sat up interested, "how, when, where, what, why?"

"Over John Ira and Joy, and that blighter Dudley Phayre. The thing begins to look nasty. The women have started sniggering in the club."

I lay back again on the pillows with a grunt of disgust.

"Since when," I enquired ironically, "has it become the Military Secretary's duty to concern himself with the amours of the public, and to attend to the tittle tattle tosh of the feminines in the club? I'm ashamed of you, Rollie. Go away. I would sleep."

But Rollie was deadly serious now.

"Would it be too much, Jumbo," he drawled, "to ask you to use for a moment what by courtesy is called your brain? Apart from the fact that John Ira is rather a particular friend of mine, can't you see, you mutton-headed ass, the awful mess-up there'll be if this thing goes any further? Famine may have to be declared in the Landhi District any moment. Plague is bound to follow. On John Ira's shoulders, as Deputy Commissioner of the Landhi District, will fall the whole burden of the campaign, with"—Rollie smiled grimly—"Dudley Phayre as his assistant!"

"Gosh!" I exclaimed, getting Rollie's point at last, "it *would* be a sweet little family party, would not it? Those two out alone in the plague camps, if—if Joy Hanbury goes and plays the giddy minx between them."

"Would not it?" said Rollie grimly. "I don't care two hoots about the gorgeous Phayre, but old John Ira is about the one man in a thousand capable of carrying through a ghastly plague job of that sort. Also he's the kind that would take it desperate hard if his girl gave him the chuck—just when he'll need every ounce of his nerve and energy." Rollie's jaw set in hard lines. "Confound that fellow Phayre, why can't he let the girl alone?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Knowing what we do of Dudley Phayre, that's an idiotic remark, Rollie. But what are we going to do about it, anyhow?"

"Do, you great ass? We can't *do* anything yet; that's the devil of it, Jumbo—we can only wait."

We didn't have to wait long.

That night at the Mahdipur Club the curtain rose in public and sensational fashion on the first act of the drama. Public and sensational it was, the rising of the curtain, and witnessed by practically the whole community: by the dancing couples who stopped dancing to press, white-faced, around the open windows; by the turbaned servants who stared and stared with dark-glittering eyes; by the band on the veranda, which stopped dead in the middle of a tune at the beginning of that extraordinary scene—and by the non-dancing brigade at the bar, among whom were Rollie and myself.

The succeeding acts, swiftly moving and terrible, set in the plague camps of Landhi, in a wilderness of death and horror, that pure-souled, high-minded community of Mahdipur would have given its ears to see. But, alas for curious Mahdipur! It was ordained that, excepting the protagonists, only Rollie and I, and old Pat Heffernan, the Presidency Surgeon, were to behold the final and amazing fall of the curtain.

I suppose John Ira, Deputy Commissioner of the Landhi District, must already have been standing for some time on the brightly lit steps of the Club before we at the bar—at that season out of doors, in an angle of the Mahdipur Club buildings—noticed anything amiss:

and it was Ginger Sarson of the Horse Battery who first called our attention to the strangeness of his behaviour.

"What's up with Ira?" rumbled Ginger at large; "he's been standing there like a bally Scotsman who's put a farthing both ways on a loser for the last ten minutes."

A flood of light from the hall and the big arc lamp over the porch fell full on a hard-bitten, brown-skinned little man in evening dress. With fists close-clenched he stared with a sort of ghastly fixity out across the lawn into the bosky shadow of the grounds, dimly illuminated with fairy lights and paper lanterns. I knew, before Rollie Dennistoun spoke, what had happened.

"Bad show!" said Rollie in a low voice. "Joy floated off a couple of dances ago towards the boat house with Dudley Phayre. Looks like there's going to be trouble when they come back."

"Oh, ho, like that is it?" Ginger contemplated the statue-like figure on the steps over the rim of his glass. "I'm sorry for him, poor devil, he won't have a small pup's chance against the fascinatin' Phayre—if Phayre means business, that is?"

"Phayre *does* mean business," said Rollie tersely. "Business is exactly the word. Joy Hanbury's got four thousand a year!"

The band struck up another dance. Couples, sauntering back into the ball-room, began to look curiously at the hard-set figure on the steps: who, unconscious, seemingly, of their presence, continued to stare fixedly into the dim-lit obscurity of the grounds: and honest-hearted Ginger spoke with warmth.

"A girl who deliberately cuts any bloke's dances, let alone her fiasco's, must be a rotter—and old John would be well shot of her."

"You've a genius for the muddy end of the stick, Ginger," laughed Rollie. "I've known Joy all her life, and I tell you, she's eighteen carat."

"She's a dam' queer way of showin' it then!" grunted Ginger.

Like Ginger I was furious with Joy, and extremely sorry for Ira.

A Balliol scholar, he was an earnest man who took his work earnestly and his polo earnestly. Several millions of simple souls in the Landhi District idolised him because of the strength and justice of his hand: and far away up in Simla, beautiful things were written of him in the Records. But, there was no doubt, in the superficial social whirl, he did *not* shine.

Great then was the astonishment when Joy Hanbury—to whom he had become engaged while staying at home with Rollie's people—arrived at Government House a few weeks preparatory to their wedding. The thing seemed incredible: for not only was the girl grossly rich, but, moreover, lovely beyond all compare in Mahdipur.

Only old Rollie, who knew both Ira and Joy, kept calm about the engagement—was, in fact, highly pleased about it.

Yet another dance began. Still there was no sign of the truants. Still the motionless figure remained staring, staring into the shadows, with that stare that was becoming positively ghastly under the light of the arc lamp.

"Oh, damn it," growled Ginger, ordering another round of drinks, "this is giving me the jim-jams. He looks as though he's frizzlin' in hell! Why don't Phayre come back and be killed, or kill him and have done with it. Anything would be amusin' compared to this."

And that was exactly how I felt myself; and I think how all those other people were beginning to feel. The suspense of seeing, dance after dance, that tortured man, oblivious of them, oblivious of everything except the anguish in his heart, staring out into the scented shadows where his love had gone with another man, was almost more than heat-strained nerves could bear.

"You're his best pal, Rollie," I muttered hoarsely, "for the love of Mike go and take him away—unless you want him shortly to be hung by the neck."

But Rollie only shook his head.

"This is a bed-rock business, Jumbo—better that it should take its course now—though," he added grimly, "that course looks like being pretty lurid."

The air of the next dance, the fifth since John Ira had

taken up his grim stand on the steps, floated up from the veranda. The latest and lightest of light gay things from home it was. "Tea for two, and two for tea," rippled the violins invitingly. But nobody danced; all remained sitting out around the lawn or loitering near the ball-room windows, their eyes impelled by an irresistible magnetism towards that stark, hell-racked figure on the steps. The intensity of the deadliest and most primordial of passions pulsed like lightning through the air. Silence fell, nervous, leaden. Probably there was not one among that crowd who had not at some time suffered, in lesser degree, what John Ira was suffering now. In silence they watched the drama unfolding—in nervous, leaden silence—fearfully, perhaps pityingly.

"And then we'll raise a family,  
A boy for you, a girl for me."

As the joyous rhythm mocked Ira's misery, a sudden gasp went up, sharp and audible. My throat tightened dryly. Ginger's sudden grip nearly broke my wrist.

"My God, Jumbo, look! they're coming!"

His voice was harsh and strained. Out of the fairy-lit shadows appeared the glimmer of Joy's silver-brocaded frock, the pale blur of Dudley Phayre's white waistcoat. Slowly the magnificent pair walked into the light—slowly on, towards the man waiting for them; waiting for them, staring at them, from the steps, with murder in his eyes.

"Ah . . . !"

You heard people catch their breath. Somewhere a woman screamed hysterically—and then silence fell again, the most dreadful, pregnant silence I have ever known. For it was then that the band, with one impulse, ceased to play, and stared, nerve-bound, like everyone else, at the three actors on the bright-lit stage.

In silence more painful than any sound, and through eternal moments, the couple walked on towards the steps. John Ira, till then an immobile statue of Wrath, began to move at last. With eyes fixed terribly on the two, he began slowly to descend the steps.

"There'll be murder, Rollie," I whispered again beseechingly, "for the Lord's sake, do something."

But there was a note of something very like satisfaction in Rollie's calm voice when he whispered back.

"A purely private and personal affair, Jumbo. Silence in the stalls!"

The couple had reached the pool of light from the club. I looked at Joy. She, too, was staring fixedly at her man, slowly descending the steps like a figure of doom, towards her: and her lovely face was white and deeply agitated—but not, I noticed, even in that tense moment, with the agitation of fear. And never, I thought, had she looked more alluring than under the stress of this emotion which lit up her face with the lustre of a strong character profoundly moved.

For Joy Hanbury—for all her exquisite features, and that figure, and those legs and ankles which caused all the young he-population of Mahdipur to moan restlessly in their sleep—was a very remarkable character.

Rollie, who came from the same part of Somerset, had told me all about her: a straight-riding, straight-minded English country girl who had no use for men who didn't "do things." That, of course, was why she had been attracted by John Ira. And now John Ira, with fists convulsively clenching, and eyes boring into the eyes of the man who was with her, was not more than five paces off. As yet no word had been spoken.

"Now!" grunted Ginger, mopping his brow, as Ira's lips moved at last, and the harsh words rang like a whip-crack in our ears. Expecting, I hardly dared think what, I glanced apprehensively at Dudley Phayre. He was a terribly beautiful person—tall and beautiful, with golden hair, and a genius for boldly extravagant effects in dress. Recently transferred to Mahdipur from the south, he had at once become very popular on account of his bonhomous manner and his ready flow of that sort of hearty badinage which passes for wit at the bar. But Rollie and I, who in our official capacity at Government House, knew *why* Phayre had been transferred—and the reason cannot be decently set down here—were not at all taken in by the glamour of his appearance and his manner. Rollie sized him up pretty soon. "Charm is his stock-in-trade," pronounced Rollie contemptuously; "he's the



most relentless fortune-hunter my toe has ever itched to kick."

Yet, standing there beside Joy in the limelight, Dudley Phayre, Assistant Superintendent of Police, was certainly very splendid to behold.

As he looked back into the pain-distorted features of the smaller man, there flickered over his own face a faint smile of triumph and disdain. And John Ira's lips, from which the white-hot words were falling now, were twisted with the anguish of nethermost limbo.

"Joy," he cried harshly, and his terrible accents stilled every movement in the awed, scarce-breathing audience. "I want the truth. Do you care for him more than me?"

"Yes, perhaps one ought to tell him, Joy," said Phayre superciliously.

But the agitation had deepened in Joy's white face as she looked from one to the other. We, everybody, all that ear-straining crowd around the lawn, held their breath painfully for Joy's reply.

"John, dear," she spoke at last with a penitent little gesture, "I've been a perfect beast to cut your dances—I'm sorry, dreadfully sorry, but—but—the truth is, I—I—don't know my own mind."

"Oh, Lord! these women!" groaned Ginger.

"But she soon will, Ira," drawled Phayre, touching her bare arm with proprietary arrogance. "Don't be impatient, Ira, she soon will."

And then while Joy explained the situation, I understood for the first time that the marriage business isn't all sugar for a girl.

"John, dear," she was saying gently, "you've always been so straight and splendid to me and I know that I seem to be behaving disgracefully to you—but don't you see, dear, it would be far worse to marry you, if—I had found meanwhile that I cared more for somebody else."

"Quite, quite," murmured Phayre. "You do see that, Ira, don't you? She couldn't dream of treating you so wickedly."

I heard Rollie's teeth grit in his head, saw his toe fret dangerously.

"The swine!" he blasphemed; but poor John's anger was getting beyond control. He was a plain, straightforward man who did not understand these subtleties. He swung round on Joy.

"This is nonsense!" he cried peremptorily, "do you care for this man more than me. Yes or no?"

Joy looked distressfully into the furious eyes.

"I've told you, John," she faltered. "I just don't know."

Never shall I forget the harshness of John Ira's laugh. "Right," he said, roughly thrusting her out of his way, "that's all I wanted to know. The matter lies between Phayre and myself. We'll settle it now." He took a pace forward and glared up into Phayre's face with blazing eyes. "Now, look here, you gilded lady-killer," he stormed, "if ever I catch you fooling around my future wife again—as sure as there's a God above, I'll kill you—kill you. Do you get that? And now if you value your precious beauty, clear out of this—quick!"

There could be no manner of doubt about the seriousness of Ira's intentions. But Phayre looked down on him with an amused smile.

"Not in the least," he laughed lightly. "You see I'm helping Joy to make up her mind—and you wouldn't have me withdraw my help from a lady in distress, would you, Ira?"

Swift and sudden were the events that followed this intolerable taunt; but—because of what came later—they stand out with peculiar vividness in my mind. Until that moment the three had held the stage. With a low cry of rage, John Ira sprang at the other's throat. In an instant the two were rolling over and over on the lawn, locked in what every one of that silent crowd of spectators knew must be a deadly embrace. As we sprang up from our chairs at the bar and rushed towards them, I saw Joy, her face distracted with agony, throw herself upon the men, and tear frantically at Ira's life-throttling fingers; and as soon as Rollie and Ginger had freed Phayre from the deadly grip, and I had raised Joy, trembling violently, to her feet, I was aware that the stage was crowded. From the club building, from the

"It's all very well for you to stick up for Joy," I said, "but in my opinion—and Ginger's too—she's behaved perfectly rottenly."

Rollie looked up from the plague sheets with a grin.

"Not a bit of it, Jumbo, the girl's perfectly right. Remember, old lad, marriage is a life-sentence—unless you happen to be a Yank!"

"Then," I said, "why don't you tell her what a sterling fellow Ira is—and what a mountebank Phayre is. Make up her mind for her, in fact?"

Again Rollie grinned.

"You know something about horses, Jumbo," he said, "but you've got a lot to learn about women!"

And at that moment Joy Hanbury herself came into the room. I had not seen her since the fateful night of the dance, as we had been in the out-districts practically all the time, and I was shocked by the traces of suffering in her sensitive face.

"Rollie," she began at once on a contralto note of anxiety, "has anything, anything—anything dreadful happened at Landhi? You know what I mean?"

Her hands fluttered tremulously, and I experienced an odd spasm of uneasiness at the way in which she spoke.

Rollie gave her a quick glance.

"No, old thing, not that we know of. Why do you ask?"

"Because—oh, Rollie, I've had such dreadful dreams! That night at the dance they would have killed each other if you hadn't separated them—all because of foolish me. Oh, Rollie, you don't know what a difficult thing it is, sometimes, to be a woman. And now, out there, amid the burning dead, I know, oh, I *know*—"

She broke off hiding her face in her hands, while a queer sensation tingled through my nerves. It was, I told myself, the oppression of the death-laden air that had preyed on her—and everybody else's—mind. Yet the evident terror of this usually so normal and fearless girl, whose dreams had become reality to her, filled me with a strange apprehension. And even while Rollie tried to comfort her, a *peon* came in and handed him a

telegram : which, having read without so much as the flicker of an eyelid, he passed on to me. It was the wire that Pat Heffernan had been constrained to despatch in such haste from Landhi. Pat was the last man in the world to cause unnecessary alarm and despondency, and I suppose my face must have betrayed to Joy the gravity of its contents. It ran :—

“ Devil to pay here for love of Moses come out at once Pat.”

As I looked up Joy uttered a little cry.

“ What is it? ” she cried, “ tell me? I know it’s about them. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

I looked desperately at Rollie.

“ Give it to her,” he said gently.

I saw the last vestige of colour leave her cheeks, and she clutched wildly at her throat.

“ I knew it,” she murmured—then, recovering herself in a moment, “ When do you start, Rollie? ”

“ As soon,” he said, laying his hand on my shoulder, “ as old Jumbo can get our kit into a car.”

“ Oh, I’m so glad, so glad.”

And courage and resolution shone once more in her eyes as she quickly put the question.

“ Are there any white women in the camp at Landhi, Rollie? ”

“ There are,” Rollie nodded gravely, “ some *very* white women—nursing the women and children in the hospitals. Nuns from the convent of the Sacré-Cœur.”

“ Then I’m coming with you to join those nuns. If I’m on the spot I may be able to keep the peace. Otherwise I simply daren’t think what may happen. I’ll be ready in ten minutes, Rollie.”

“ Stop! ” I cried aghast, as she made for the door, “ you don’t know what a plague camp is. It’s no place for a girl. The Governor wouldn’t hear of it.”

Calmly ignoring my outburst, Rollie opened the door for her. “ Be ready in ten minutes then, old thing,” he smiled, “ I’ll take the responsibility with His Ex.”

As the door closed behind her I turned astounded upon him.

"Are you crazy?" I cried. "It's—its *unthinkable* to plant a precious society girl in the seventh hell of a plague camp. Besides," I added hotly, "it's simply asking for murder between Ira and Phayre."

For answer Rollie tapped that ominous telegram on the table.

"I fancy things can't be much worse, Jumbo. Pat doesn't get the wind up without reason. Better for all concerned that this thing should be brought to a head.

"Also," he added with unusual solemnity, "I'm very fond of Joy. She's a big woman, Jumbo—big as they make 'em—and out there, against that awful background where men's souls stand out stark and bare, she will see soon enough which is the better man."

That drive out to Landhi was not an exhilarating excursion. Joy, who like most country girls had passed First Aid and done a good deal of Guide camping, sat in workmanlike dress beside Rollie at the wheel, while I, among our kit at the back of the car, was left to my own thoughts—which were far from pleasant. The *Shamal*, a blistering, sand-laden wind, sickly with the odour of corruption, blew in our faces from across the desert; and all along the horizon there rolled those dark, sinister smoke clouds where they were burning the dead.

"Strange," I mused, glancing from time to time at Joy's pale face, "that the love of woman should dominate this vast and terrible arena of death. How mighty and immortal is Love!"

And towards evening as the car ploughed along the sandy river road, and we passed wattle villages where nothing but the jackals and the heavy-flopping vultures were alive; and, further on, villages peopled now only by skeletons of man and beast, clean-picked and gleaming under the sun—and, as the red glow in those distant smoke clouds, becoming visible, told us that we were at last approaching the hell of Landhi, I became more and more troubled in mind about Pat's wire. What could it mean? Anything, surely, could happen in this abomination of desolation. Should we be in time? And if not—what additional horror would that poor suffering girl have to face?

And thinking thus, I suddenly beheld a well-known figure galloping at great speed towards us from the now visible segregation camp.

Pat Heffernan . . . my heart thumped!

"Praises be ye've come, Rollie," he panted, flinging himself off his pony as we pulled up—only to break off with an astonished stare at the woman in the car.

"Miss Hanbury's come to join the Sisters, Pat," Rollie explained quickly. "She's interested in this. You can speak out. What's the trouble?"

"The throuble?" Pat was fairly shouting now. "If ye don't hurry, 'tis blood will be the throuble—aye, murder and hangin' too!"

And when Pat elucidated, holding the reins in his hand, while we strained over the edge of the car, I received, I admit, about the worst shock of my life.

"Them two's daggers drawn over something," said Pat, "and Ira's abusin' his authority to do Phayre in—no less! And," went on Pat in tones of distress, "'tis partly me own fault!"

"Do Phayre in?" asked Rollie sharply, with a quick glance at Joy's face which had gone deathly white; and I believe my own went just as pale when Pat replied.

"He's orthered Phayre to break in the Darwaza-i-Maut before dawn to-morrow wid his handful of police—and burn the place to the ground!"

The Darwaza-i-Maut, the dread Death Doors of Landhi. . . .

"Good heavens!"

I stared at Rollie incredulously. This was melodrama with a vengeance.

On the southern outskirt of Landhi lay a high-walled enclosure, containing, among other things, a so-called Hindu temple. We knew perfectly well that, in reality, it was a den of thieves, that it harboured all the worst *badmashes* in the District, who had collected there under the leadership of a renegade priest, and, secure under a cloak of false religion, terrorised the neighbourhood at will. We knew too that Ira had long urged its extirpation, but that hitherto Government had hesitated to take a step which might involve fanatical disturbances. But

the huge mud wall was nine feet thick, and the only ingress by those baleful Death Doors—so called because it was death for any but a member of the villainous gang to try and enter. Double-barred, double gates of brass they were, loop-holed from above, and guarded always by armed sentinels. It was a job for a whole battalion and field guns—not for a handful of police.

“Ira’s been doin’ ten men’s work, never restin’ night and day,” continued Pat. “Maybe his mind’s unhinged!”

“I see,” Rollie nodded; “but how’s it *your* fault, Pat?”

“Shure, we’re making no headway against the plague in Landhi at all, for as fast as we clean up the town, terrible great rats—as big as foxhounds, begob!—come lollopin’ across from the Darwaza-i-Maut again, spreadin’ death in bucketfuls.”

“‘We’ll never shtamp ut out till that sink o’ iniquity is desthroyed,’ says I to Ira.

“‘Right,’ says he, wid a quare gleam in his eyes. ‘I’ll desthroy ut—’tis me chance to force Government’s hand.’ And wid that he ups and gives his orthers to Phayre, as I told ye—and this minnit they’re goin’ at ut hammer and tongs up in the tent there—Phayre callin’ him a black-hearted, murtherin’ villain, and declarin’ the thing isn’t humanly possible. Come on now, quick, unless ’tis the coroner ye’ll need to be sending for.”

But Rollie had already jumped out of the car.

“Take her on up to the camp, Jumbo,” he whispered in my ear. “I’ve had old Muldoo out here since the show started, and I want to hear from him how the land lies.”

And with a quick wave of the hand, he vanished into the medley of the segregation tents.

Neither Joy nor I, nor Pat Heffernan, cantering alongside, spoke a word as we drove through the camp up to the Deputy Commissioner’s headquarters. So full were our minds of this sinister turn in the situation that we scarcely heeded the ghastly human litter on the ground—those awful figures with bone-ends bursting out through the shrunk skin, that moaned and tossed

skeleton arms under the sun till death should find a place for them within the tents; or, on the other side, the endless rows of still, stark, scarcely more emaciated forms, awaiting space upon the spluttering fires. As we strode into the headquarter tent, Phayre's voice, raised in furious anger, broke off abruptly. He and Ira, facing each other across the table in shorts and shirt sleeves, sprang up and stared wide-eyed at Joy. Without preliminaries she came straight to the point.

"John," she flung out a hand in an accusatory gesture towards the work-haggard man who was gazing at her with smouldering fire in his eyes, "what's this about your sending Dudley to certain death?"

For long moments of silence those burning eyes of Ira's continued to search her face. There was in the deep suffering of them a curious quality I could not understand. Phayre, though pale and strained, was still his very beautiful, immaculate self, and had at once regained his self-possession on Joy's appearance.

"Well?" she demanded impatiently: and at last Ira replied to her—in the impersonal tones of authority.

"We can't wipe out the plague while that cess-pit exists. Empowered by the provisions of the Plague Code, I've decided to destroy it—and have instructed Phayre accordingly."

"Although," cried Joy, "you know quite well it's sending him to his death!"

And in the tense moment following this terrible accusation, while black thoughts of Ira's conduct crowded into my mind, there occurred a startling manifestation. Suddenly, right into the tent, reeled a revolting apparition—a *Namadari* fanatic clad in the filthy yellow robe of his sect.

The blood-injected eyes, blazing like rubies in the foully paint-smearred face, glowed with an unearthly light; and when the creature, staggering about the tent like a drunken man, began to utter in harsh croaking accents, the tongue that showed between foam-flecked lips was black and swollen, like that of a man already dead.

"Plague—the final delirium!" muttered Pat, as the



creature, with a jangling laugh, broke into torrents of speech.

"Ha, ha!" he cackled in maniac mirth, addressing himself to Phayre, "do you think to violate our Darwaza-i-Maut? Listen then to me, whose feet are now upon the Bourne, and whose eyes already behold the bliss of Vaikuntha. Listen to me, ye mad English, who are ignorant of our Godhead's ways. Whosoever of ye or your minions defile that sacred ground shall not come forth again but as carrion. Aye, as carrion shall ye come forth to the waiting jackals, while your spirits are sped to the torments of Naraka. Ha, ha, ha! to the torments of Naraka. Ha, ha, ha!"

Cackling hideously, the dreadfully delirious creature whirled out of the tent again in a sort of crazy dance.

A warning from the open grave. . . . !

It seems ridiculous now, but no words can convey the terrifying effect upon our nerves, already tattered by the atmosphere of death and deathly hatred.

Phayre's jaw had dropped. I wiped the sweat from my brow. Even Pat, deep-versed in Eastern mysticism, was white as chalk.

"You heard that, John?" Joy's voice, scarce above a whisper, vibrated tremulously across the awe-struck silence. "What do you say now?"

But Ira's haggard face had not changed expression. He laughed shortly. "We should get a lot done if we listened to the ravings of every wretched *Bairagi*! Personally I do not believe that, if the stroke is boldly executed, the risk is great—at any rate not so great as is justified by the object." He turned abruptly to Phayre. "You and your men will blow in the gates with guncotton before daylight, clear out the quarter, and burn it to the ground."

In view of the Darwaza-i-Maut's notorious impregnability, and the ghastly utterance of the dying *Nama-dari*, what else could one think, but that the tremendous passion of Ira's love had driven him homicidally insane. If ever there was a case of coolly-calculated murder it was this—and when Joy spoke again, her voice was subdued with horror.

"John, you *can't* do this dreadful thing!"

Ira shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't understand, Joy, it's a necessity. In cases of this kind, the individual doesn't count."

"Thank you," muttered Phayre, "thank you very much, Ira."

But Joy had now lost all control.

"If you think that, John," she flung out at him, "why don't you do it yourself?"

"It's not my job," said Ira quietly: which was, we knew, the plain truth. "And," he added, rising from the table, "we will not discuss the matter further. Duty is duty, and you have your orders, Phayre."

"The black cap!" I heard Phayre mutter between clenched teeth. He had been silent and shaky since the ravings of that dreadful apparition; but, before Joy, he made an attempt at recapturing his debonair manner.

"If there was the slightest chance of success," he said, looking from one to the other of us, "if the plague could be stopped by this mad scheme, I would gladly give my life. But you all know there isn't a hope—you know my life is being thrown away, *deliberately* thrown away"—he shot Ira a glance of bitter hatred—"as was once the life of a certain Uriah the Hittite."

Then, bowing dramatically over Joy's hand, he touched it with his lips.

"Dear, it is good-bye then. You will not forget?"

I did not like Phayre, but there was something deeply moving about the farewell of that magnificently romantic figure, standing on the threshold of eternity; and the tears were streaming from Joy's eyes, as she turned and blazed out at Ira.

"You coward, oh, you miserable coward!"

And at that moment the *khitmatgar* announced that dinner was served.

After escorting Joy across to the Sisters' quarters, and making some pretence of eating, I hurried off to Rollie's tent. I found him emerging from his bath, in excellent spirits.

"Had a very interesting chat with old Muldoo," he

said, referring to his jewel of secret agents. "But tell me," he grinned, "were our rivals pleased to see Joy?"

"By heavens, it's nothing to laugh at!" I said; and I told him all that had passed.

"We were wrong, Rollie," I added in conclusion. "Phayre's the better man after all. He's genuinely in love with the girl. And as for Ira——"

"Dudley Phayre," interrupted Rollie dryly, pulling on his pyjamas, "is in love with one person only, and that person is Dudley Phayre."

"Anyway," I said, "as the Governor's representative here, you won't allow his life to be thrown away in that insane way?"

Rollie regarded me with twinkling eyes.

"You've never studied psychology, Jumbo?"

"What the dickens is that?"

"Briefly," drawled Rollie, "the science by which we determine what a man will do next."

And with that he pushed me towards the exit. "Stay with Joy in the morning while the battle rages, Jumbo. Good night, old lad."

"But—but——" I stammered.

"Night, night, Jumbo."

And not another word could I get out of him. Apparently Rollie had gone dotty too.

After a few hours, in which the crazed *Namadari* raved of horror and torments through my fevered dreams, I heard the little band of police mustering in the darkness outside, and quickly dressing, I picked my way over to the Sisters' quarters.

"Has—has he started?" asked Joy's low voice in response to my gentle tap on the canvas.

I nodded, unable to speak as she came out, fully dressed, and stood beside me. Dimly I could guess what she must be suffering at this havoc her indecision had wrought. In the stillness of the pre-dawn gloom it was as though we were awaiting an execution—and while we stood together, staring, staring into the mass of shadows half a mile in front that was the *Darwaza-i-Maut*, waiting for the fateful crackle of rifles, there suddenly shot up

through the blackness a great tongue of fire, followed instantly by an ear-splitting roar.

"He *has* surprised them!" I cried excitedly, "stout fellow, oh, stout fellow!"

"Ah, but it's only just beginning," breathed Joy, her fingers tightening on my arm.

A century of leaden seconds passed, and then a flame curled up from the density of the shadows, and then another and another, till in a few moments the whole pestiferous quarter was enveloped in a red and roaring conflagration. I seized Joy's hands and jazzed her wildly round.

"He's done it, old thing, by gad, he's done it!"

But she broke quickly away and pointed in the direction of the now raging flames.

"Look, Jumbo!"

In the swiftly-spreading Indian dawn I saw that gallant little band of police returning. There was no white man among them—and they were carrying something on a stretcher.

"Wait here," I said gently to the white-lipped girl, "I'll go and see."

"Nay, 'tis naught serious, Sahib," grinned the police havildar, as I approached the stretcher.

I am no stranger to surprises—far from it, but I think the surprise of my life was when I drew back the blanket, and looked into the worried face of—*John Ira!*

"Good Lord, *you?*" I gasped.

"Put back that blanket, you ass," he growled, "at all costs I mustn't be seen. Joy's got to think that Phayre did the job after all."

"But—but," I cried, "what the devil does this mean?"

"Only," said Ira from the stretcher, "that it was made painfully clear to me last night that I'm the also-ran in this race. And since she definitely prefers Phayre"—his lips twisted in a wry smile—"I'm scratching—that's all. Go and tell Joy that her precious Dudley behaved like a blue-eyed hero."

But while I still gaped at him we were startled by the voice of Joy herself. Having followed me to the stretcher

she had, apparently, overheard everything, and her woman's instinct supplied those details which were as yet not clear to me.

"John, my dear, dear man," she gurgled, with the laughter dancing in her eyes, "I'm so glad you didn't have to send poor Dudley after all."

"Oh?"

Ira spoke sharply, puzzled—as I was—by her unaccountable merriment.

"Because, dear," she rippled, "I couldn't with decency have married a man whom everybody believed to have tried to murder his rival! That's why I was so angry with you last night."

Kneeling beside the stretcher she laid her cheek against his.

"Try to forgive me, dear, for that moment of madness at the dance. I know now, what deep down inside me I've known all along—that my old John is the only one man in the world."

"Well, I'm damned!" I grunted, doing record time for Rollie's tent.

Inside, Pat and Rollie seemed to be enjoying a huge joke.

"Well," grinned Rollie, "has Joy yet discovered her own mind?"

"She has," I said, "but what the devil's happened to Phayre?"

Rollie raised his eyebrows.

"At the time of starting our dear Dudley was found to be sick—very sick."

"Not plague?"

"Not plague," said Pat, "a more devastatin' affliction known as cowl'd feet!"

"A constitutional weakness of Phayre's," went on Rollie with a wider grin, "aggravated by the gibberings of a certain clownish *Namadari*!"

And then, knowing something of Rollie's methods, I began to see light.

"You old rascal," I shouted, smiting him over the

shoulders, "so that plague-stricken prophet was *you* all the time?"

Rollie smiled deprecatingly.

"Some credit is due to Muldoo for the make-up, since it even took in old Pat here. You see," he went on, "a man who could be scared from his job by bilge of that sort is no mate for Joy."

"Quite," I nodded; "and the storming of the Death Doors wasn't such a tough job after all?"

"No," said Rollie, "Muldoo, of course, had long since made it his business to join the Darwaza-i-Maut gang, and last night I—dressed again as the *Namadari*—and he, and some stout confrères of his, went in by their underground bolt-hole from the city. I thought perhaps the storming party might require a little assistance from the inside—but there wasn't a living soul inside. All dead of plague."

"So Ira was right after all," I said; "he would have been justified in sending Phayre?"

"Perfectly," said Rollie—and then reverting to the matter of Joy's decision, he clapped me on the back.

"Let this be a warning, Jumbo, not to let your daughters marry till they've seen more than a few men—for all gold does not glitter, and it's a wise girl that knows her own mate!"

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## THE TWILIGHT OF PAMESWARA

THERE is an amiable type of Briton who is the friend of every country but his own. For the open enemies of England he vouchsafes an especial tenderness—the more malignant their enmity, the deeper his tenderness. Happily the species is scarce, but it usually finds its way into Parliament, and manages to make more noise there than its size and nastiness would justify; which is unfortunate, since volatile foreigners are thereby liable to get a quite totally erroneous idea of that at-bottom eminently sound old fellow, John Bull—and, moreover, the work of the White Man in the outer parts of the Empire is not made easier by the neurotical vapourings of the said species.

But there is one member of the species who, meddling meretriciously with fundamental matters far beyond his ken, came swiftly and suddenly to a salutary knowledge of Things as they Are, in a manner that—but as usual I am getting on too fast.

Rollie and I were slowly hacking back to Government House from the polo ground when we espied, cantering up the Mall towards us, Lady Barbara, the Governor's niece, with Denis Malyon, the rising young socialist M.P., who, after the manner of the species, had come out to get a complete mastery of our Indian Question in the space of a three months' cold-weather visit, spent entirely in the marble halls of Government Houses and Viceregal Lodges.

"That breed of animal," grinned Rollie, jerking his whip towards the approaching politician, "makes me feel unwell! His health during the war only allowed him to stay at home and make umpteen millions out of an anæmic insult he labelled beer—and then, from ambition

and a craving for notoriety, the filthy humbug goes and joins the Socialist Party!" Rollie disgustedly flicked his pony's off wither. "I hope," he growled, "old Carlo Dawson cuts him out!"

The bitterness in Rollie's usual bantering tones was partially explained by the fact that Lady Barbara aforesaid was the sister of that other girl whose photo had so long stood by Rollie's bedside, and of whom no one—not even I—ever spoke to him now. But more so, I think, because Charles Scott-Dawson, of the Royal North Sussex, then quartered at Mahdipur, loved Lady Barbara with an exceeding great love—and Carlo was one of the very best, a stout fellow of the super-stoutest sort. And Denis Malyon, who, since his arrival, had been paying furious court to Lady Babs, was—well, what I have already said. Wherefore I most warmly seconded Rollie's hope regarding old Carlo Dawson.

"But you needn't worry, old lad," I laughed, regarding with admiration the merry-faced girl cantering towards us, "Lady Babs is a perfect little topper, and far too sensible to go marryin' a slimy, elocutioning leper of that order."

Rollie, however, shook his head doubtfully.

"She's awfully young, Jumbo—full of life and sparkle and all that, and just the sort to be captivated by a brilliant fellow like Malyon with the glamour of Cabinet rank hanging over him. And he, being a socialist, is of course an infernal snob and would give half his fortune to marry into the Peerage. And"—Rollie smiled grimly—"Her Astuteness the Governor-ess is pushing it for all she's worth, with one sheep's eye firmly fixed on the Malyon Millions. Hullo, good evening, Lady Babs—evenin', Malyon!"

They turned back with us, the two of them—the slight, golden-haired girl in the dust-grey Busvine habit, and her handsome, slightly-hebraic-featured cavalier, who sat his horse in a wary and defensive manner, as one deeply mistrusting the dictum that the horse is a noble animal and the friend of man—though we'd mounted him on the most patent-safety old slug that blighted the fair fame of Mahdipur. And while Lady Babs chatted



vivaciously to Rollie ahead, Malyon, happier now that we'd pulled up to a walk, proceeded to favour me with a few supercilious remarks. His opinion of soldiers was not high, and he never thought it worth while to conceal the fact.

"I suppose," he said sarcastically, "your exacting social duties haven't left you much time to form an opinion of Krishnavarna?"

Now Krishnavarna, as most of the world knows, was the star seditionist of the day, standing somewhat in the same relation to India as at that time de Valera stood to Ireland; and on Malyon's dark-eyed, dark-browed face as he contemptuously asked the question, was all the superlatively supercilious superiority of one facetiously asking a school girl her opinion on Relativity. So that I couldn't help chuckling inwardly at his astonishment when I politely replied that I had once had the misfortune of making that traitor's acquaintance.

"What?" he regarded me with the sudden interest of him who chances on the pearl in the putrid oyster, "you don't mean to say you *know* Krishnavarna?"

"I've met him," I repeated, whisking a fly off my pony's flank, "in queerish circumstances; connected with a thing they call the Upainayasha—when one Vivian Mandeville came to a nasty end." For a moment I pondered that bygone, ghastly tragedy in silence—for concerning the dead it profits not to speak ill—then aloud to Malyon again, "And I rather think it's a meeting that comrade Krishnavarna won't forget in a hurry!"

To my surprise Malyon jerked his pony to a standstill; and, as soon as Rollie and Lady Babs were out of ear-shot, he stared at me in the most crudely suggestive manner.

"Look here, soldier," he said in a low voice, "I want to meet Krishnavarna."

I fairly gasped.

A white man, a British Legislator, *wanting* to meet that arch-rebel! . . .

But Malyon being a guest of Government House, it behoved me to conceal my contempt and to reply with outward *politesse*.

"Apart," I said, regarding curiously this pluperfect specimen of the reptilean species, "apart from the trifling matter of being concerned in the murder of a dozen or more white officials, Krishnavarna has caused more death and misery among his own peaceable countrymen than the Great Plague of '96. Is it permitted to ask, therefore, why you are so anxious to meet this murderer?"

Malyon's reply was the last word in cynical superciliousness.

"You wouldn't understand, soldier," he said, "you wouldn't understand. Of course these little incidents are regrettable, most regrettable, but Krishnavarna is the astutest politician of the day. We have a lot to learn from him. Also," he laughed in a way that caused my toe to itch in the stirrup, "an acquaintanceship with Krishnavarna would be worth thousands of votes to me at the coming election in my enlightened constituency!"

The wholesale killing of white men and loyalists, rebellion and murder, mere regrettable little incidents! The resources of our language are painfully inadequate to the expression of my opinion concerning this filthy, vote-catching mountebank. But I had met the breed before, and as I rode on in silence, not thinking it worth while to answer, he spoke again—even more suggestively.

"Soldier," he edged his pony alongside as we turned into the gates of Government House, "they tell me Krishnavarna's in Mahdipur."

"Oh?" I exclaimed interested, because of late we had been sore troubled with political dacoities—those political outrages which invariably coincided with Krishnavarna's movements—"I wasn't aware of the fact!"

"He is though," Malyon nodded sagely. "His Nibs the Governor, was fulminating about it just as we started on our ride. And he, being an official of the old, hide-bound traditional school, would throw about fifty fits backwards if he knew I were to meet Krishnavarna. Therefore, soldier," he dropped his voice another tone, "I want to arrange a secret meeting?"

I suppose he must have seen from my face that I wasn't altogether enchanted with the idea—though even

his thick skin would have shrivelled to crackling if he could have read exactly what I did think of it—wherefore he made me a sweet proposal—one that makes me smile as I write it now.

“Wine and women and polo aren’t cheap these days, are they, soldier? And I take it you’re dipped like the rest of ’em.” He glanced at me obliquely. “Fix up this meeting with Krishnavarna, and—and I’ll give you a thousand quid.”

Turning quickly away to hide my mirth at this delicious offer—coming from a young war-profitteer, if you please, to a man who had been four times wounded in the service of his country—my eyes lit upon the tennis courts, where old Ginger Sarson and his two subalterns were playing a slashing set.

The fourth was Carlo Scott-Dawson—he who loved Lady Barbara as a proper man should—that is to say to the extent of doing anything this side of Eternity for her sake, without any unnecessary chat about it. And while I regarded their smashing drives and volleys, a beautiful idea began to insinuate itself into my brain. Ours is a gloriously free country, so free that our honourable legislators are in no way discouraged from taking unto their bosoms the openly exulting murderers of our race. But there is a limit even to what the species may do, and Malyon, in his kind and generous offer to me, had overstepped that limit.

“Not enough, eh?” he looked at me calculatingly, as I replied not. “I’ll make it two thou, then?”

Whereupon, as gravely as might be, I signified my assent.

“Right!” I nodded choking, “I’ll fix it.”

But even as, dismounting at the portals of Government House, I was about to rush Rollie off to his quarters, fairly bursting to tell him the great joke, there came for him an urgent summons to the Governor’s presence; wherefore, acting for once, in my impatience, on my own, without the ballast of old Rollie’s level head, I proceeded forthwith, with the purest motives in the world, to set certain matters in train—matters which—such being the capriciousness and perversity of Fate—

were to develop with startling rapidity into one of the most gruesome and unexpected adventures in which we had yet been involved.

My first move in the blind and fateful skein of circumstances was straightway to gather Ginger, Carlo and Co. from the tennis courts to my room, to whom I communicated with shaking sides the lovable Malyon's offer.

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Ginger when I had finished. "Offered you two thousand quid to fix a meeting with that stinking traitor? Priceless, Jumbo, priceless!"

But while the great red man and his subalterns, Tiger Wade and Chips Cunningham, rocked in ecstasies of delight, I saw that Carlo Dawson's wholesome, blue-eyed British face was convulsed with fury—for a man powerfully smitten with love is apt to lose something of his humour.

"You don't mean to say," he burst out, "that foul swine tried to *bribe* you, Jumbo?" And when I nodded deliriously, he turned to the others with an angry gesture that upset his glass.

"You hear that, you fellows? What are we going to do about it?"

Whereupon I most obligingly answered for them.

"If the honourable gentleman is so keen on meeting Krishnavarna," I murmured sweetly, "then, I say, in the cause of hospitality, we must see that he *does* meet Krishnavarna—at least," I added with a significant grin, "a Krishnavarna."

"Ho, ho, good old Jumbo!" chortled Ginger, instantly tumbling to the idea, while the others gurgled happily, "who's going to feature the lead?"

"Why, you, of course, old red-neck!" I shouted, smiting him on the back. "Didn't you fairly bring down the house as the Rajah of Bhong in the last garrison gaff? You're simply cut out for the part!"

And thereafter, amid rumbles and chuckles of holy joy from Ginger and his lads, and wrathful ejaculations from Carlo, I expounded the pretty little scheme that some malignant imp of Fate had flashed into my mind.

Seven miles down the Lohari river, I reminded them, stood the village of Chamkanni. And just outside its

north gate stood a renowned *banyan* tree, widely venerated among the Hindus for strange and idolatrous reasons. What place could be more suitable for the communion of twin-souls than beneath the sacred branches of that mysterious tree? "And to-night as ever is," I chortled, "under this Herne the Hunter's *Banyan*, our incomparable Malyon shall meet his beloved Ginger Krishnavarna—the latter, of course, attended by a retinue of disciples proper to his exalted saintliness!"

"Great, great!" gurgled the others, for whom earth held no greater joy than being occasionally allowed to assist Rollie and me in our nocturnal, native-character adventures. "And in what manner," enquired Ginger tenderly, "shall we entertain the reptile?"

"The Holy Ginger Krishnavarna," I explained, "will treat him to a little bolshie patter in his inimitable chee-chee; and having elicited the information that Malyon is a brewer of beer, and bad beer at that, he will wax wrathful. For to do the real Krishnavarna justice," I added parenthetically, "he does at least live up to his principles of poverty and abstention—and would, I fancy, have a pretty terse way with this shallow humbug of a p-seudo-socialist."

"To brew beer is a righteous thing," rumbled Ginger. "But a brewer of *bad* beer!"—he felt his biceps lovingly—"what form had my wrath better take, old Jumbo?"

"First," I chuckled, "you will solemnly reprimand him as one who, having in his dispensation the most precious gift of the gods, has profaned his sacred charge with the alloy of venomous and money-saving chemicals. And then," I continued, "while our dear friend stands astonished at this strange doctrine from the lips of the Prophet Krishnavarna, you will make an elaborately portentous sign; whereat we, your disciples, will lay hands upon the wicked brewer and place him, butter-side-down, across your knee; whereupon you will administer such castigation with the butt-end of your *sadhu's* staff as may seem necessary for the redemption of his soul—in no way sparing the rod! Thus," I concluded piously, "one poison-gas merchant at least will

have learnt the inadvisability of meddling with the work of proper men. Have I said well, mates? ”

They declared with acclamation that I had—all except old Carlo, that is, whose sense of humour, as has already been said, was temporarily eclipsed by the devastating passion—and perhaps also, by repugnance of his unsavoury rival; so that he protested with emphasis and at length that the punishment did not even at all half begin to meet the crime.

“What’s the good of giddily burlesquing about beer?” he growled. “You can’t let off a man who tried to bribe a British officer with just a playful spanking!”

And it was old Ginger that put our sentiments in a sentence.

“It’s beneath our dignity, Carlo,” he laughed homERICALLY, “to get wroth with vermin of that sort.” Then to me, with a staggering blow on the back: “But the two thousand quid, Jumbo, you must sting him for that!”

“Yes, by gad!” yelled Tiger Wade, “you must sting him for that, Jumbo, somehow, you must sting him for that.”

“It shall be did,” I grinned back. “There are still about a hundred natives in the Rippon Hospital as the result of the last Krishnavarna riot, and I shall forward the cheque for their relief—in Malyon’s name! Consider,” I exclaimed, “the beauty of the press notices.

“‘Mr. Denis Malyon’s munificent gift to loyalists injured in the recent Swaraj riots.’”

“That,” I added joyously, “will take a bit of explaining away to his Clydeside colleagues in the House!”

“Lovely, lovely!” cooed Chips Cunningham, and thereafter we gave our attention to the details of the scheme. The moon would be full by ten o’clock, at which hour we decided, after some parley, Malyon should present himself beneath the Sacred Tree. “And now, you fellows,” I instructed them in conclusion, “push off *ek dum*, and robe yourselves in *kadr* and Krishnavarna caps—and Rollie and I, similarly arrayed, will call for you in the car at nine. We must get there in plenty of

time—to set a suitable scene before the curtain rises!”

Hardly had they departed, with wide, anticipatory grins, before Malyon himself sauntered into my room.

“That’s a firm offer about Krishnavarna, eh, soldier?” he asked, calmly filling his case from my cigarette box.

“Absolutely,” I nodded gravely, “I’ve been getting busy about it since I last saw you. It can be fixed all right. It only now remains——” I broke off tentatively.

“Oh, the thousand quid, eh?” he remarked casually.

“Thousand? *Two* thousand!” I replied with firmness. “Make it guineas now. It’ll—it’ll look better,” I murmured softly, thinking of the hospital subscription list.

But while he wrote out the cheque, comforting his mean spirit, no doubt, with the thought that every guinea was worth a vote, he couldn’t refrain from taunting his supposed tool—such being the sweet nature of that kind of animal.

“There, my Soul of Honour,” he blotted and handed me the cheque, “my soldier *sans peur et sans reproche*, my chivalric parasite of the ratepayer, I’m not very old, but I’ve lived long enough to find out that every man—and woman too—has their price; and that price,” he smiled unpleasantly, “is always most agreeably small. Now then,” he rose from the table and faced me briskly, “what’s the arrangement?”

Hugging myself inwardly at the discomfiture that awaited this extremely lovable young man, I led him to the large-scale map that hung on the wall between my “Snaffles” pictures.

“Here’s Chamkanni,” I said, indicating its position with a pencil point. “Be there at ten to-night—punct to the second. Leave your car in the *dak* bungalow compound, and walk to the Sacred *Banyan* Tree, just outside the north gate—here.” I dabbed in the pencil again. “You can’t mistake it. Underneath it Krishnavarna will be waiting for you.”

But Malyon’s next utterance gave me somewhat earnestly to think.

“Her Ex. had arranged for me to take Lady Babs for a moonlight ride to-night,” he said thoughtfully; “it

would look odd if I got out of it now. I suppose there's no objection to my taking her? You see," he added with a smile, "I've told her what an amazing phenomenon old Krishnavarna is, and she's curious to see him. She can be relied on to keep her mouth shut."

"H'm," I reflected, my brain functioning with unaccustomed fertility, "I don't see any objection—provided, of course, that the Governor doesn't get to know."

For the idea that was titivating my imagination was this, no less. Lady Babs was a great girl, a truly great little girl, but like too many thousands of that gullable body, the electorate, she had been captivated by the external glitter of Malyon's handsome presence and vivid personality. And it struck me as eminently desirable, both in her own interests, and in the interests of old Carlo Dawson, that she should now witness this polished humbug being shown up in his true colours.

"N-no," I repeated, "I don't see any objection."

"Right ho," he nodded, draining his whisky and soda. "We'll be there at ten o'clock." Then, with a queer, contemptuously amused look, he made for the door. "Don't make a beast of yourself on that money, soldier!"

"Um," said I to myself, as the door shut behind him, "of—all—the—unmitigated——"

But my pious panegyric was cut short by Rollie's abrupt entry; and I saw with a start that there was in the back of his steady grey eyes that odd light which denoted trouble—big trouble, in the offing.

"Jumbo, old lad," he exclaimed, "I believe we've got 'em at last!"

"Not the Anusilan murderers?" I cried excitedly.

Rollie nodded. "Two more dacoities in the out districts. His Ex. is in the deuce of a stew. And now"—he spoke as one producing the ace of trumps—"Krishnavarna is in Mahdipur!"

"Krishnavarna!" I chuckled, and was beginning to acquaint him with the Great Joke, when he continued with an impatient gesture.

"These political dacoities are the devil and all, Jumbo. There's a fiendish ingenuity, a sort of insane sanity about



Along that dread and secret way, Muldoo told us, the *deva-dasis*—the temple courtesans, that is—had been dragged shrieking to their doom when the obscene priests had wearied of their charms. Along that dark way, enduring Heaven knows what torment of spirit, the sacrificial victims had passed to Durga's maw—and the crocodiles that expectantly lashed the mephitic mud beneath the altars. And it was along that way that we were now to walk, to overhear the Anusilan's plan.

"Into Durga's belly leads this passage," continued Muldoo, "which is as spacious as the inside of a *tikka ghari*. A door there is, a door of flagged stone, cunningly contrived, that opens above the goddess' hip on to the altar slab—but that we shall not need. But through Durga's eye, the great flaming eye in her forehead, we may behold and hear all that passes."

"Good!" exclaimed Rollie, "nothing could be simpler. Great Scott!" he started as a brazen bellow reverberated through the buildings, "there's the dinner gong. Eight o'clock. Come on, Jumbo, we must hustle!"

Speeding down a pitch-dark noisome alley between rickety hovels, where lean dogs slunk nosing among the refuse, we entered the gloomy precincts of the temple, whose bee-hive dome loomed hugely out of the shadow-flung murk against the sombre vault of space. Gliding noiselessly as ghosts across the deserted outer courtyard, we ascended by a broad flight of age-worn steps to the massy gates of bronze; where Muldoo, producing from the folds of his raiment a delicate steel instrument, such as is in favour with our most progressive cracksmen, proceeded to manipulate the lock.

"At this hour," he muttered, as the heavy gates swung open, "Ram Nath, the Priest, makes merry in his house."

It is a strange thing that a man who has passed most of his life in war without being much more scared than the next fellow, should be so profoundly disquieted by a gallery of graven images. But for the life of me I couldn't help feeling as jumpy as a child as I peered into the gloomy interior with its rows and rows of huge,

stark idols, inexpressibly hideous and obscene in form—splashed, most of them, with daubs of crude paint, and adorned with tinsel that glimmered sinisterly grotesque in the macabre flicker of the Eternal Lamps that ever burned upon the altars.

In those dark aisles there brooded still, it seemed morbidly to me, the essence of all that is most primitive, most bestial and most cruel in the unplumbed deeps of the human soul, accumulated there throughout the uncounted centuries. The gods of this people were still the bestial, human-lusting gods of mythology expressed in stone in the most monstrous shapes ever conceived by the bogey-haunted mind of primeval man.

Yet above and beyond this sense of barbarism there was a something I could not fathom, an overawing something, which, perhaps, no white man ever will fathom; a something, I realised with a shudder, from which Krishnavarna drew his power, and which inspired the blood and terror that rioted through India to-day—a something which was direly related to that very meeting whither we were hastening.

“Follow, Sahibs!” Muldoo padded soft-foot up the nave between the shadowy, vague-looming gods with eyes downcast. “Look not on these Holy Ones,” he adjured us, “lest their displeasure be incurred.”

“Plucky old devil!” whispered Rollie in my ear; “not one Hindu in a million would have dared to profane Pameswara’s Temple like this—and he’s all of a dither as it is. Good old Muldoo!”

True enough, the old man’s hand was so shaking that he fumbled an eternity about the pedestal of the most gigantic of the images before a flagstone in its plinth, revolving without a sound, disclosed the black-yawning mouth of the “Victims’ Way.”

There are certain memories in life that a man does not care to dwell upon; and one of these was that of the next ten minutes, while we traversed, bent-double, that foul-smelling, tubular passage, where unseen things scuttled at our approach, and the dank-dripping sides crawled with the slimy loathsome things of darkness and corruption. The fetid air of the place stank of death,

the very stones still re-echoed the agony and despair of the doomed; and I was not at all sorry, when, slithering up some green-slimed steps, Muldoo signified that we had arrived.

"Now," whispered he, as we emerged into the drier air of a conical vault, dimly illumined in a crimson twilight, "are we in Durga's womb. Ye may talk, aye, shout if ye will, sahibs, for thus is this chamber contrived that all which passes in the court is echoed here within, as in a sound-box, through the nostrils of the Deity—though no sound escapes." He stood erect and stared through what looked like a small blood-hued porthole. "This," he exclaimed, "is Durga's eye. Men believe it is a fabulous ruby, but," he chuckled, "'tis but glass, thirteen inches of stained, translucent crystal. Look, sahib!" he touched Rollie's shoulder, "the Anusilan Samiti is already met. The *Parichalak*, the Leader, begins to speak!"

With a gasp of excitement I peered over Rollie's shoulder, through the crimson-hued porthole—and the sight that met my eyes was one that I shall not soon forget.

At any time a band of spectacled, half-starved-looking college youths, solemnly binding themselves to the committal of a deed dastardly enough to shake the most hardened criminal would be a startling sight. But when one viewed that sight from the womb of an age-old, bloody Idol whom those youths worshipped; and when the haggard, nervous faces of those half-grown boys blazed with an indescribable intensity of fanaticism as they drank in the hortation of their young leader, couched in language as passionate and lofty as any in which Burke ever pleaded the Rights of Man—well, one felt one's bearings slipping.

But what lent a final touch of the bizarre to that drama we were looking upon, was the distorting quality of the porthole. That great crimson prismatic Eye bathed, as it were, the scene before us in deep hues of blood; and it magnified many times, even as a telescope magnifies, so that the circle of incarnadined conspirators squatting there in the moonlight appeared to us huger than the

gallery of Idols we had just left in Pameswara's Temple; and the form and features of each individual thus distorted and enlarged as though by the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil, took on the aspect of a Brobdingnagian *delirium tremens*.

And while the monstrously phantasmagoric faces twisted and contorted before us, the *Parichalak* drew to his peroration, fervidly entreating his brethren not to falter in their great crusade till not a member of the Satanic White Race should remain to pollute the sacred soil of the Motherland.

"Grateful little poll parrots, are not they?" murmured Rollie, "when you consider that nothing but the sword of the said Satanic White Race prevents them from being incontinently blotted out by the warlike northerners!"

But before I could reply, an expectant hush fell, and the awesome figure of Krishnavarna himself rose, gigantic, commanding, at the foot of Durga. And now—as on that other dread occasion in the Nushima Bagh—when Krishnavarna's deep, sonorous voice rolled out, I felt my hair unaccountably rising on my scalp—felt that I was in the presence of things for ever incomprehensible and unknown. And it was not till nearly the end of the long oration, all involved with unpronounceable Sanskrit symbolism and the gods and heroes of vedantic antiquity, that I grasped that he was inciting these crazy youths to the massacre of a peaceable village of their own countrymen for no other reason than to swell their revolutionary funds with the loot.

"Take up your arms from the Altar," he declaimed in conclusion. "Fear not to use them in the service of Bharatvarsha. Even from Kailasa above," he uplifted his hand towards the illimitable void of night, "the Holy Ones look down and guard their valiant servants. And now the barque awaits——" with a gesture he indicated a large river bandar-boat on the snarling mud-brown flood behind them. "In the name of Ganesha, Arbiter of Undertakings, get you gone swiftly to Chamkanni—and do what you must do!"

Chamkanni . . .!

While horror momentarily paralysed my tongue, Rollie spoke with triumphant calmness.

"The kernel at last—after all those oceans of verbiage! They're going to pillage Chamkanni. We've got them, Jumbo, by gad, we've got 'em!"

But as I watched the gang of crazy murderers climbing into the clumsy, country-made boat, while Krishnavarna still stood, like Joshua on the mountain, with arms uplifted, my utterance returned, and I told Rollie the Great Joke—breathlessly poured out the story of how Malyon had tried to bribe me, and how I had arranged for him to meet a bogus Krishnavarna at Chamkanni that night.

"Well," grinned Rollie, who was tolerant of all things save treachery, "that seems to be Malyon's trouble!"

"But," I groaned in my anguish, "he's taking Lady Babs with him!"

"WHAT?"

Grabbing me by the arm, he dragged me headlong back into the "Victim's Way." "Hurry, Jumbo, hurry, man, there's not a moment to lose!"

Such was my trepidation of spirit at what might befall that little English girl whose life my incredible folly had put into this deadly peril, that I have only the vaguest recollection of our wild rush through the noisome tunnel, through the sinister Idol-looming twilight of Pameswara, through the now sleep-wrapt bazaars and back to Government House to get our rifles and the car—and then out to Ginger's bungalow in the Artillery Lines.

"You're devilish late!" roared that quite passable impersonation of Krishnavarna, as he and the others, in their *Swadeshi* garments, tumbled into the car, "it's twenty to ten now. What the dickens——"

But a grim silence fell upon them when Rollie explained—while the car roared along the sandy river-road towards Chamkanni—the terrible development in the situation, on all except Carlo, that is, who, carefully charging the magazine of his rifle, put to Rollie the question that none of us dared utter.

"Can we get there—in time, Rollie?" he asked with

a calmness that in no way hid from us, who knew him, the torment of his lover's heart; and my own heart bled for him when Rollie answered that it was barely possible, since our road made a seven-mile detour of the delta bunds, whereas the gang had slipped down direct upon the ebbing tide.

Never had car raced so fast along that miserable apology of a road; yet, as we tore around the swamp's last bend, a ragged crackle of pistol shots and a few tentative tongues of fire beginning to leap up from the dark, shadow-shrouded mass of the village, told us all too plainly that the raiders were already at work.

"Too late!" groaned Tiger Wade. But as we fell out of the car under the north gate of the village, whence rose the long-drawn quavering wail of women and all the heart-rending tumult of terror and despair, a sight struck upon our eyes that was the gladdest I have ever seen. For where the moonlight splashed full upon the Sacred *Banyan* Tree, we saw, through the network of its hanging roots, the figures of Malyon and Lady Babs—bound to the trunk, it is true, but frantically struggling.

"She's alive!" cried Carlo; and there was more of rapture and of passion in those two words than in the lyrics of any poet.

"Stay near the tree and guard them, Carlo," ordered Rollie, "but on no account make yourself known. Never mind why—do as I tell you."

Subsequent events were rapid and dramatic. The essence of these *badralog* dacoities is rapidity; and the gang having, according to their carefully conceived plan, looted and murdered the wealthiest inhabitants, and then wantonly fired the village, came dashing in a body out of the gate towards their white captives—dashed straight into our arms, so to speak, so that our first burst of rapid fire laid about half of them kicking in the dust; whereat the remainder flung down their arms, abjectly yelling for mercy.

For this is the strange thing about that breed, that, although they will show extraordinary courage in matters of underhand intrigue and passive resistance, they have less pluck than the proverbial mouse when it comes to

a fair and open fight; insomuch as they allowed us—although, not counting Carlo on guard by the Sacred Tree, we were still but five to some thirty—to disarm and bind the survivors without a blow. Which leaving Ginger and his lads to finish off, Rollie and I hastened back to the Sacred Tree; and as we ran thither, I enquired of a certain matter.

“Why,” I said, “wouldn’t you let Carlo make himself known? Rather cruel, wasn’t it, prolonging their misery, like that?”

Whereat Rollie chuckled a low chuckle and responded by asking me a totally unnecessary question.

“Old Carlo’s a pretty praiseworthy sort of lover, eh, Jumbo?”

“Praiseworthy?” I laughed, as we sped on. “He’s terrific, Rollie, simply terrific. Though he never yaps about it, he absolutely puts your old Orlandos and Romeos into the class of also-rans!”

“Quite!” Rollie grinned under the moon. “And therefore I’m going to do some dirty work—quite positively filthy work!” Then to Carlo, as we reached him: “Stay here, both of you—and keep still, Carlo, this is your benefit. Now watch me!”

It would be hard to say which of us was the more astonished when Rollie, distinguished-looking as a movie Sheik in his white robes and bronze-dyed face, stalked up to the Tree, and having first whispered awhile in Lady Babs’ ear, came around the bole and addressed Malyon lashed to the opposite circumference.

“Having achieved most highly successful dacoity,” he said to that terror-struck prisoner in a perfect sing-song imitation of babu English, “we must now in accordance with Edict of Holy Book sacrifice one white goat to the Mother. Lady here”—he pointed to Lady Babs—“offering five hundred rupees not to have inestimable privilege of auspiciously sacrosanct immolation.”

I admit that this was rough stuff to put across a man who’d already been pretty well scared out of his wits; but when Malyon started yelling and blubbering for his life, and I remembered his genial philosophy of life as

expounded to me that afternoon, his response turned me sick with disgust. "Let *me* go!" he screamed frantically. "Lady very poor. I very rich big man in England. I giving fifty—hundred—thousand thousand—any much you like, saving me!"

Now, as has been said, Lady Babs was a high-spirited girl, and the expression in her eyes was not pretty at this exhibition of chivalry on the part of her cavalier. Nor did I envy Malyon his feelings when Rollie's unmistakable laugh rang out, and he spoke to the girl in his own voice.

"There are some things, little lady," he said significantly, "that it's as well to know—before it's too late!" Then to Malyon, cutting his bonds, "I suggest, Sir Perfect Knight, that in future you leave the affairs of India to the men who understand them."

But this sage counsel appeared lost on the progressive Legislator, who, Lady Babs informed us, had been in the same semi-conscious state of gibbering funk since the moment that the Anusilan gang, suddenly appearing over the river bank, had straightway surrounded and bound them to the Tree, saying that they would deal with them after certain urgent business they had in hand.

And when Lady Babs wanted to know the why and wherefore of these strange things that had befallen, Rollie, deeming Carlo the proper person to enlighten her as to this delicate matter, took me by the arm and led me off to 'phone for the police, what time Ginger and Co. completed the trussing of the Anusilan gang.

The capture of that notorious Samiti, caused, needless to say, a sensation throughout India. But the part played in it by Malyon and Lady Babs, and its origin in my Great Joke, were, for reasons of State, discreetly kept in camera—Rollie contriving with his usual effacement that the police should get all the kudos—which, incidentally, simplified matters. Nor were two closely related events, namely, the sudden departure for home of that eminent young politician, Mr. Denis Malyon, on urgent public affairs, and the engagement of old Carlo Dawson to Lady Babs—which was announced amid



joyous shouting at the Christmas Ball—in any way connected in the public mind with that great capture.

But even in the happy issue out of this dark and tangled affair there remained one sad blot on the perfect consummation of the Great Joke. Malyon's cheque for two thousand guineas, which I duly forwarded to the hospital, was returned with the inscription, "Refer to Drawer."

He had made it out on a bank in which he had no account.

"Dirty dog!" chuckled Rollie, when I showed it to him. "Bone-dirty dog!"

## ASSASSINATION

THE community of Mahdipur had little knowledge of our real life at Government House. They saw the Governor always courteous and smiling, the gracious host *par excellence*, presumably without a care in the world. They saw us, superficially, as a crowd of brilliantly-uniformed satellites, revolving in an orbit of sparkling splendour, glittering official functions and perpetual pageantry. They envied, perhaps, our light gay round of laughter and champagne. But of our work, of our unceasing conflict against those incalculable forces of sedition and disruption that are ever undermining the fabric of our Indian Empire, they knew nothing—less than nothing.

Usually this conflict was impersonal : that is to say, our energies were exerted in the abstract cause of duty—directed towards the preservation of that great, patient, long-suffering, beneficent Ideal which is embodied in the might, majesty, dominion and power of the British Empire. But there came a day when this conflict became deadly personal; a terrible day which neither Rollie Dennistoun nor I—though our lives at Mahdipur brimmed over with memorable days—are ever likely to forget.

It was on the morning of the first opening of the Legislative Assembly that things began to happen. Mahdipur, like all the other provinces, had been granted a measure of Home Rule under the recent Reform Act; and at eleven o'clock that day the Governor was to drive in state through the city to initiate, in the King's name, the proceedings of the newly-elected legislature. It was a significant, not to say momentous, step on the ladder of India's progress—a step which was hailed by

the great mass of the people with unaffected rejoicing; but to which the seditionists, because it deprived them of their most cherished grievance, were malignantly opposed.

"There's going to be trouble, Jumbo, sure as fate," Rollie had said to me after a long talk with old Muldoo. And an hour or so before the procession was due to start from Government House, I sat with Rollie in his office poring over that map of his; that world-chart on which were co-ordinated, by a series of coloured graphs, the world-encircling, sinister currents of that dark Power, which—by ceaselessly fomenting turmoil and unrest—aims at the overthrow of our civilisation.

"Yes," said Rollie, shaking his head over the map with grave, grey eyes, "the seditionists will stop at nothing to wreck this Home Rule scheme. You see, Jumbo, it cuts the ground from under their feet."

And before I could answer there was a sharp rap on the door, followed by the spur jingle and the clatter of Bob Haviland's sword as he strode across the floor. He was already dressed ready for the procession in the dark full dress and jack boots of the Indian Police, and on his cheery, sun-browned face was an expression of the most unusual agitation.

"I say, Rollie," Haviland spoke hurriedly in a tense whisper, "it must be stopped!"

"Be a trifle more explicit, old boy." Rollie, unable to help smiling at Haviland's patently worried face, rose languidly from the map and offered him a cigarette. "What precisely must be stopped, Bobo?"

"Why, the procession, of course—this State opening of the Assembly!"

I stared at the policeman in amazement. Two brigades of troops were already lining the streets; all Mahdipur was already jostling behind those troops for front places; many thousands of people had flocked in from the out-villages to see the great spectacle—and the procession was due to start in less than an hour. Impossible to stop it now. Bob must have gone crazy. But Rollie's voice when he answered, showed no surprise.

"What's in the wind, Bobo?" he asked quietly. And even Rollie's habitual coolness momentarily failed him when Haviland, in a horror-struck whisper, imparted his terrible news.

"The seditionists—they're going—they're going to try and assassinate the Governor!"

"What?" I gasped, looking from one to the other with a sudden sickly feeling—for, almost like sons, we loved that old sportsman—"they're—they're not going to try and kill His Ex.?"

But they were though—not a doubt of it. In answer to a sharp question from Rollie, Haviland quickly told us all he knew. As evidence, it amounted to practically nothing; but to us who knew India, his story was profoundly disquieting. It was part of Haviland's duties to keep himself informed, by means of a widespread net of intelligence agencies, of all that was done or said or thought in the bazaars. And that morning there had come to his ears a faint whisper, an almost inaudible Indian whisper, light and intangible as the Indian air, of this projected assassination. Whence it had emanated, who had breathed it, no man, as is the way with such Indian whispers, was able, or would dare to tell. Yet Haviland, sensitive as a wireless to these rumour-currents, had instantly interpreted it into terms of dreadful fact.

"There's not a shadow of doubt," he declared solemnly to Rollie, "that during the procession, an attempt will be made on the Governor's life."

"You're certain, Bobo?"

"I'll stake my professional reputation on it. You see," he explained, "the seditionists' object is clear as daylight. They think this vile act will goad Government into measures which they, the seditionists, will then proceed to shriek aloud to the world as brutally repressive and reactionary—and so wreck the Reform scheme."

"Quite," Rollie nodded, "quite. You've no idea though, *where* they will make the attempt?—or how? I mean bomb, rifle, pistol or what?"

Haviland shook his head.

"Not the remotest. The procession passes through about two miles of streets. There'll be about a

hundred thousand spectators in those streets, and as many more in the houses. Of course I'm taking every possible precaution in my power, but it's a needle in the haystack sort of business. Therefore," he looked Rollie full in the eyes, "you must stop the procession."

But I could see from the expression on Rollie's face that he was not yet convinced of the necessity of this extreme step. It is not the British way to withdraw from engagements of public duty for fear of some personal risk—even though that withdrawal is urged by as stout-hearted an officer as Bob Haviland. Slender as a girl, lithe and sinuous as a panther, Rollie turned to the spurred and booted policeman.

"No, Bobo, we must risk it," he said with a smile. "A last-minute postponement of the Reform—in the present hysterical state of the country—would create a most dangerous impression. We must risk it," he laid his hand on Haviland's tunic, "and rely on you, old Bobo, to see His Ex. safely through."

But Haviland's reply was emphatic and final.

"No," he said with a touch of temper. "I'm in charge of the police arrangements for the procession—and I decline, *officially* decline, to take responsibility for His Ex.'s life. You must stop it, Rollie. If you don't," he clashed his steel scabbard on the floor and spoke with impressive solemnity, "it's my considered opinion that you're sending the Governor to his death."

This was a nice situation! I stared speechless at Rollie. I understood of course, that the programme, if humanly possible, should be carried through. But His Ex.—one of the greatest-hearted gentlemen I had ever known—that intensely human old nobleman who worked like a slave and played like a boy—was it right that he should be permitted to take this terrible risk, even at the urgent call of duty? And while I still stared at Rollie, not envying him his decision, that decision was taken out of his hands. A brisk step sounded on the veranda, the *chic* was thrown aside, and the Governor himself stood framed in the window.

Looking thus suddenly on our threatened Chief, a sharp spasm of pain shot through me. There was a smile

on his face, gay as the gay carnations in his button-hole, as his lanky, boyish figure—still boyish despite the greying moustache and eyebrows—swung on into the room, and we abruptly drew ourselves up to attention.

"What's this about sending me to my death, Haviland?" he smiled at the saluting policeman. "I heard your cheerful remark," he went on to explain, "as I was passing on my way back from the stables."

Well, the cat was out of the bag. One did not bandy words or temporise with His Ex. He was a hard-facts, bed-rock sort of man who insisted on plain dealing. And when Rollie and Bob Haviland, after a little hesitation, had explained the situation, the Governor put to the policeman the same question that Rollie had done.

"You're certain, Haviland, an attempt will be made?"

"Absolutely certain, sir."

Whereat the Governor genially patted him on the back.

"Then, in your position, my boy, you were quite right to try and stop the procession. Your protest shall be put on record. No blame shall attach to you. I myself will take the responsibility for anything that may occur." Still smiling, he took a step towards the door. "Meanwhile, it's time you were getting ready, boys. We're due to start in an hour."

"One minute, sir," said Rollie respectfully. "You remember that Her Excellency will also be in the State carriage?"

"Ah!"

The Governor stopped abruptly. Evidently he had not remembered. He tugged at his bushy moustache.

"H'm," he said reflectively, "it is of vital importance that the ceremony should be carried out. Any delay at this juncture would probably have far-reaching, even disastrous, consequences. Personally," he smiled again at Bob, "I have more faith in Haviland and his police, than he has himself, to prevent any—any accident. But——"

"Why not leave Her Ex. out of it?" I interrupted. "It could be announced that she was indisposed?"

The Governor shook his head.

"Even so there will be others in the carriage—you Rollie, and the A.D.C.-in-waiting, and Jumbo riding alongside. I hadn't, I confess, considered that. I couldn't ask others to take a risk which my own family declined. When the rulers of a country," he went on as though speaking his thought aloud, "begin to shirk the dangers of their great position, then, history tells us, that country is in its decline. But if a leader falls in the execution of his duty, there are others as able to step up into his place—and his country is richer for the example. No, no, come what may, I shall drive in the procession. Rollie, go and ask my wife to come here."

We, of the Government House Staff, had little love for Georgiana, Lady Bellington. She was a hard-featured, steely-eyed patrician with a harsh, unsympathetic outlook on the world. No doubt the Governor knew our sentiments regarding her, for while we awaited Her Ex's arrival, standing there, as it were men, already under the shadow of death, the Governor spoke out simply from his heart.

"You may wonder why I do not follow your suggestion, Jumbo," he said to me, "why I do not prevent my wife with some pretext from taking her part in to-day's ceremony. Well," he began to pace the room, "in my opinion no public man can do great work without the support of a courageous wife. In all the big events of my life I have confided fully in mine. And," a note of pride crept into his voice, "often and often when the burden of critical affairs has almost crushed me, I have drawn from her the strength and inspiration to carry on. She may have her little faults, Jumbo—what woman hasn't?—but no man has ever been blessed with a stauncher partner. Throughout life we have shared our trials together, the rough and the smooth—and I now intend to put the facts before her, and leave it entirely to her to decide whether she accompanies me or not in the procession. Ah, here she is!"

Life in a place like Mahdipur, where one is continually at grips with battle, murder and sudden death, leaves little room for sentiment. Yet while the Governor,

speaking in the most matter-of-fact tones, told his wife that he was practically condemned to death, and asked her—as he might have asked her to make up a four at tennis—whether she would care to share his death with him, I felt a strange, strangling sensation in the throat. Lady Bellingdon's eyes glittered no less steelily, her features were as hard, her voice as harsh as ever, while her husband acquainted her with the situation. Behind that rather forbidding façade I could detect no glimmer of emotion.

“ You see, Georgie,” the Governor concluded, “ if you do come, you will, according to Haviland here, be taking your life in your hands. Now, what do you think about it? ”

Never were seconds longer than those in which she weighed her reply. Although I did not like Lady Bellingdon, I would have given all I possessed to hear her decline—for she was, after all, a woman. Instinctively I guessed, as we turned our eyes away from her terrible inward conflict, that she was thinking of their only boy who had fallen with the Guards at Le Cateau—and I was right.

“ Harry,” she spoke to her husband at last, and her voice was, if possible, still more harsh, “ poor Nigel never hesitated—and he was young, so young. What business then, have two old things like us to hesitate? Of course I'll come with you, Harry. But——” she looked first at Rollie and then at me with that steely glance that always made my skin pringle, “ we must not endanger others. We will go alone in the State carriage—you and I, Harry, without escort.”

“ You can leave all that to me, Your Ex.,” said Rollie with grave gentleness. His own eyes reflected something of the pride that shone in the Governor's; and I too, looked with a new light on this old Gorgon whose spirit could rise so matter-of-factly to the call of duty.

“ Well, old Jumbo ! ” Rollie looked at me with a smile when the old couple had thereafter gone off arm-in-arm to prepare for the procession, “ you heard what she said. What about it? Does the Bodyguard not escort Their Ex's carriage? ”



"Does the Military Secretary," I grinned back, "not accompany Their Ex's in the carriage—because," I smote Bob Haviland across the shoulders, "this foolish police-wallah has got the wind up?"

"Anyway," said Rollie, still with a faint grin at the absurdity of the notion, "it was decent of Her Ex. to give us a chance of saving our skins. Push off, Bobo," he turned almost gaily to the sad and silent Haviland, "time's getting on, and we must dress for the funeral." And he added with a laugh, "but we still have a lingering prejudice in favour of life, Jumbo and I—and if you *don't* pull us through this show, we'll make it devilish hot for you, my lad, when eventually you join us down below!"

At bottom, I suppose, Bob Haviland was more emotional than we. All the time Lady Bellington was speaking, his Adam's apple had worked in a convulsive manner, and now there were actually tears in his eyes—for since the affair of the Sabhan Post he had absolutely worshipped Rollie.

"I'll do my damndest," he muttered huskily, "but I've no clue—not a vestige of a clue—that's the devil of it, Rollie!"

And as, abruptly—lest his feelings overcome him—he clattered out of the door, we could see by his face that he believed that he had spoken to us for the last time—believed firmly that he had bidden us good-bye.

A clue, however, an astounding and providential clue, was quickly forthcoming. As Rollie and I were leaving for our quarters to change into full dress, there rushed unceremoniously into the room old Sher Singh, Risaldar of the Bodyguard.

"*Sahib! Sahib!*" he cried wildly. "Business that will not wait!"

We stared in astonishment at the bearded old Indian officer. He made a magnificent figure in his turban and gorgeous uniform of scarlet and gold, white breeches and gleaming thigh boots. But the habitual oriental calm had deserted his face, his fists clenched and unclenched, he was clearly under the stress of powerful emotion.

"*Sahib!*" he burst out to Rollie, "you know my son—Nathu, my youngest son?"

Rollie nodded quickly. We had met Nathu, a highly-strung boy of about sixteen, when we had spent a couple of days shooting at the Risaldar's village some months before.

"Has aught befallen him, Risaldar *Sahib*?"

"Befallen him!" the old officer trembled with passion. "Even now, while I turned out the Bodyguard for the procession, his mother came to me—aye, from our village had she come, driving the fifty-three miles since dawn—bearing a tale that—that—" the Risaldar's shoulders heaved, "that has for ever blackened my face with shame."

Speaking rapidly, and like a man suddenly aged and broken, the Risaldar poured out this extraordinary tale, brought in such timely fashion by his wife. Their boy, Nathu, had been for some time a student at the native college of Mahdipur. He had unexpectedly arrived home the night before. His manner was so strange, and his eyes so wild that his mother had been greatly alarmed.

"Tell me, oh my sonling," she wept, "what is this grievous thing upon thy mind?"

"Mother, oh my Mother," answered Nathu, "thy son's life is dedicated to the service of the Motherland. I do what I must do—and I—I am come to bid thee farewell!"

"Thus word for word spake they," said the Risaldar. "And thereafter, so says his mother, he embraced her with the tears streaming from his eyes. 'Farewell, dearest of all to me!' he sobbed once more, and vanished again like a wraith into the night."

Rollie glanced quickly across at me with the well-known light of action dancing in his eyes. But the Risaldar was speaking to him again.

"You, *Sahib*, who know nearly all things—you have heard whispers regarding the procession to-day? Aye. Is it not clear then, that the word-mongering, student-catching seditionists have ensnared our son? Our Nathu, unlike his soldier sires, was ever a talker, a dreamer. What meant that speech with his mother, *Sahib*, but that

they have so wrought upon his unstable fancy that 'tis he, even Nathu, flesh of my own flesh, who will—who will . . .”

The war-decorated veteran broke off choking. Shame and horror overwhelmed him at the thought of such a deed on the part of his own blood. But in a moment the old fire returned.

“Stood my son before me now,” he cried, half-drawing his sword from the scabbard, “I would smite his traitor’s head from off his shoulders!”

“Nay, nay, Risaldar Sahib,” Rollie pushed him gently towards the door. “This news thou hast brought is beyond all price. And for reward,” Rollie’s voice was vibrant with excitement, “it may yet be, if God wills, that we shall save thy boy from himself and for thee. Nay, ask no questions. Time is short. Haste back to thy duty.” And turning eagerly to me as the old officer’s spurs jingled down the corridor, he exclaimed, “By gad, Jumbo, here’s a clue with a vengeance! Something deadly definite to go on! Once we’ve caught young Nathu, their game’s up!”

I shook my head hopelessly.

“There are two hundred thousand inhabitants in Mahdipur,” I said, glancing at the clock, “and you’ve got exactly forty-seven minutes to find Nathu in. Not an earthly, Rollie.”

But Rollie’s slim figure was all alive with fire and action.

“If Muldoo can’t bolt him in less than half that time,” he chuckled, “then Muldoo’s not the old ferret he was! And by all that’s lucky, Muldoo’s up here now, in the servants’ quarters.”

Thrusting an automatic in his pocket, he bounded out of the window—turning on the veranda to shout back with a grin:

“Tell Their Exs., I funk’d the procession after all!”

A lesser man than Rollie, I reflected, as I dressed with mournful deliberation for what I felt convinced was my death, would not have dared to incur the suspicion of cowardice in such circumstances. All the same, though I regarded myself as doomed, I was glad that Rollie—

old Rollie who had so often and so desperately risked his life for others—was safely out of this ghastly business ahead.

Punctually to the second, as the first gun thundered out from the saluting base, Their Excellencies emerged from the portico of Government House, descended slowly, between lines of sentries, the broad flight of steps, and, with a firm step, mounted the State carriage awaiting them at the foot. With sword raised in the salute from my place on the right of the carriage, I saw at once that they were alone. They had, on some pretext no doubt, dismissed Monkey Malden, the A.D.C.-in-waiting. As they settled into their seats the Governor looked up and caught my eye. He was, I knew, surprised that after all Rollie had shirked the ordeal; and the look he gave me was one that I shall always remember with pride.

A moment later, and the fateful procession had started. In front rode a troop of the Bodyguard, under Hubert Vernon, my Adjutant; then came the open State carriage with Their Excellencies inside, I riding on the right, Risaldar Sher Singh riding on the left; and behind followed another troop, and behind it other carriages containing prominent officials and Members of the Council. In this order we clattered out of the North Gate, across the Maidan, and into the be-flagged and tumultuously crowded streets of Mahdipur.

In a soldier's life there come many episodes of almost unendurable strain. Waiting, watch in hand, for the stroke of zero hour to leap over into the roaring hell of the batteries; night on the silent troopship, which any second a torpedo may transform into a pandemonium of death and terror; cowering earthwards while the bombing 'planes rain shattering havoc from the skies—these are things which call for every ounce of a man's nerve control. Of these, and other such things, I had, of course, had my full share. Yet, as we progressed through those streets where hidden death awaited us, I was, I admit, in a positive sweat of fear. No other experience in my adventurous life had approached that torturing agony of suspense. I gazed down, nerve-racked, on the dense

crowds that surged behind the gleaming barrier of bayonets. I gazed up, nerve-racked, at the dense, gaily-clad masses swarming on the roof-tops. What form, I wondered, would the attempt take? Would a volley suddenly crackle out from one of those upper windows? Or would Nathu, alone, hurl a bomb into the carriage? In either case my own chances were practically *nil*.

Jogging alongside in the saddle, I looked down at Their Excellencies. At that close distance, I could see that their faces were white, drawn, haggard; but they smiled and bowed to the wildly cheering crowd with perfect *sang froid*. Never—and this was the pitiful part of it—had they had such an enthusiastic reception. They understood, those cheering masses, how insistently the Governor had worked for their welfare. They understood that the Reform, which he was even now on his way to initiate, was the crowning achievement of his humanely laborious career. And yet, on account of that very thing, there would fly out, any minute, any second, from somewhere in that applauding throng, the shattering messenger of death.

“Oh Lord, why don’t it come, why don’t it come, quickly!” I groaned, almost unable to endure the strain of those eternal seconds.

But passing at last the Abbas Masjid, a faint glimmer of hope began to dawn in me. We had covered three-quarters of the distance. Was it possible, I wondered, that Nathu, seeing Risaldar Sher Singh riding beside the carriage, had held his hand? Even a neurotic visionary, strung up to the highest pitch of perverted fanaticism, would surely stop short at parricide. Or had Rollie, Rollie and Muldoo together, actually worked a miracle? Remembering how often Rollie—cool, slender, girlish-featured, incredibly daring Rollie—had achieved the impossible, that glimmer of hope leaped up brighter and yet brighter within me.

“Good old Rollie,” I breathed with the sudden ecstasy of a reprieved criminal, “he’s saved us after all!”

But I had dared to hope too soon.

The terrible nervous tension had sharpened all my perceptions. The awful incidents that followed, although they actually took place within the space of a few seconds, stood out as clearly and as individually in my vision as though I had been watching them from the stalls of a picture palace. "He's saved us after all!" I muttered ecstatically, as our cavalcade clattered past the Madrasseh. And even as I rejoiced, my eyes fell on the slender figure of a native student, level with the state carriage, fighting for elbow-room behind the line of troops.

I saw him stoop swiftly, as a man stoops to throw a quoit. I saw, in that same instant, the hand of one of Haviland's plain-clothes detectives grab at his shoulder. I became aware of a sudden instant hush, painful in its intensity, after the shouting; then of a wild outburst of screaming panic as the crowd, seeing the thing in the air, surged madly back in all directions. And then I, too, saw the thing in the air. . . .

That whole dreadful episode, as has already been said, cannot have occupied more than a couple of seconds, at most. Yet to me it seemed like an eternity. Fascinated, almost paralysed, I watched that dark object, rather bigger than a croquet ball, describe a parabola through the air, circle gracefully over my head, and drop with a heavy thud right into the carriage. I remember thinking then how perfectly it was aimed. Jig-jogging in the saddle, fascinated, almost paralysed, I watched it smoking and sizzling between Their Excellencies' feet.

"No, Harry," as in a dream I heard Her Ex. say, "leave it alone. It will only kill many more people if you throw it out."

Her hand was in her husband's. Proud, erect, together at the last, the old couple drove on awaiting extinction. On the left of the carriage old Sher Singh, sword stiffly at the "carry," face impassive as a statue, gazed sternly to his front, as though death at the hands of his own son were the most ordinary incident of parade.

As for me, from the moment that the bomb had fallen in the carriage, a merciful numbness descended on my

senses. So many ages had elapsed, it seemed to me, since I had first seen it in the air, that I was already very, very old; and I longed for the ending of the suspense—actually longed for the shattering roar that should put us out of our long-drawn torment. And then at last it came. . . . !

The report of the explosion was so far drowned in the panic-stricken yelling of the crowd that I scarcely heard it. I realised only that the carriage, its occupants, myself, the escort, were suddenly enveloped in dense, dark clouds of suffocating smoke. I realised dully, while the smoke-enveloped cavalcade mechanically proceeded on its way out of the danger zone, that I had escaped unhurt. And bracing my nerves at last, as the smoke slowly cleared, to face the horror in the carriage, I saw to my indescribable delight and astonishment that Their Excellencies were also unharmed; that they were in fact smiling and bowing again to the crowd as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. And on the floor of the carriage, I beheld with bewilderment, the exploded case of an innocuous, very-much-home-made smoke bomb.

By this time, of course, rumour had run like wild-fire through the city that the Governor had been blown to atoms. But for my part, I rode on like a man in a dream, and sense of reality did not fully return till Their Excellencies—determined to carry through their programme—had entered the Chamber of the Assembly, and there suddenly approached me where I waited by the empty carriage, a ragged, salaaming figure out of the crowd.

It was, I saw with a start, old Muldoo.

“*Sahib*,” he whispered hurriedly, pretending to beg, “bring Risaldar Sher Singh with thee, and haste to Haviland *Sahib* at the Police Station. Quickly, *Sahib*, ’tis a matter of life and death !”

And before I could question him he had vanished again into the crowd. But one does not disregard such a message delivered by Muldoo. Handing over the command to Hubert Vernon, I put spurs to my horse, signalled Sher Singh to follow, and three minutes later, after a

hand-gallop through the streets, we strode together into the Police Superintendent's Office.

It was, of course, clear to me by this time that Rollie must have had some hand in the matter. Seditionists do not employ their time and risk their lives in throwing harmless smoke bombs. But I was, I confess, not a little surprised when I saw, seated at the table, in earnest conversation with Bob Haviland, that very young native whose form was for ever impressed on my mind as throwing the bomb—and still more surprised when, on our entry, he looked up and addressed us in Rollie's drawling voice.

"Yes, Jumbo, I was the assassin, no less," he smiled through his make-up. "We caught young Nathu just in the nick of time. Muldoo had had an eye on him for some time back, and knew his haunts. We relieved him of this pretty toy." Rollie pointed to an infernal percussion bomb on the table in front of him. "And also of this *billet-doux*—which is why we sent for you in such a hurry!"

He handed me a slip of paper inscribed in Hindi characters, which I quickly read aloud:—

#### "OM BANDE MATARAM

"Do what thou hast to do for the Motherland with a bold heart. If the sacrifice be faithfully accomplished, run to the place agreed, where the Brethren will be waiting to effect thy escape."

"That's the reason," explained Rollie, "why I had to make the sham attempt. I knew in an instant rumours would be all through the bazaars that the Governor was killed. Otherwise Nathu's 'Brethren' would not trouble to try and save him. But now——" he turned to old Sher Singh, "if we can make Nathu divulge the 'place agreed' in this *chit*, we shall capture the whole gang of criminals who led thy poor boy astray."

"Aye," Sher Singh's dark eyes glittered fiercely, "I will make him divulge. Bring him in, *Sahib*—and a thick rope-end, to boot!"

Nevertheless I couldn't help feeling a pang of pity



when the would-be assassin was led in, hand-cuffed, between two native constables. The boy's handsome, sensitive face, ardent eyes, and dignified demeanour at once proclaimed him of the type that the seditionists find it most easy to work upon by their perversions of the Sacred Books, and to use for their nefarious purposes.

"Speak, murderer!" commanded Sher Singh, menacingly raising the rope-end, "where is this place where thy fellow-murderers await thee?"

But the angry father's eyes slowly dropped before his son's steadfast, unflinching gaze.

"Hast thou no shame?" he thundered impotently.

"Aye, father, shame unspeakable—that I failed in my mission."

"What?" roared the old man, beside himself with rage, "wouldst thou in thy madness, have slain thine own father?"

And it was only then, I think, that we realised how deep was the hold that those pseudo-patriots had gained upon the imagination of this impressionable youth.

"To help make the Motherland once more proud and free!" he cried passionately, "I hesitate not to take thy life, my father—nor mine own!"

With a sudden jangling movement of his manacled hand, before we realised what he was about, he brought his right index finger to his lips—bit hard on the swift and deadly poison that desperate men carry beneath the finger nail. "Now," he laughed triumphantly, "have I made the Brethren safe!"

"Dash it!" growled Bob Haviland, "I ought to have foreseen that. He'll be dead inside a minute—and they've escaped us after all."

And as the boy, with fast-glazing eyes, and convulsed by terrible tremors, sagged inertly to the ground, the anger died out of his father's heart.

"Nathu!" moaned the old man, throwing his arms around the dying boy, "oh, Nathu, our littlest son—we dreamed great things for thee. Thy father's long life hath passed in honourable service of the Motherland—but henceforth I go to seek out and reckon with those mad jackals who turned thy fanciful brain, and brought

thee, so early, to destruction. See, *Sahibs*," he looked up at us from the now rigid corpse, "they have killed my son, my pretty Nathu!"

Bob Haviland was staring hard out of the window, and my eyes were strangely dim when Rollie stooped down and touched the grizzled old warrior's shoulder.

"Risaldar *Sahib*," he said gently, "the fault was not thy child's, but of those that vilely mistaught his understanding. He at least showed a manly spirit. He betrayed not his confederates."

"Aye," said the old man brokenly, "he died like a man. For that I forgive—and for that his ashes shall lie among the ashes of his sires!" He looked up again at us with sorrow-laden eyes. "Will you go, *Sahibs*, and leave us, my son and I, a little while together?"

I suppose we ought to have been the happiest of parties at Government House that night. We were alive; we were unharmed; the Governor had said sweet things to Rollie and me that positively made us blush. Yet, after we had told him the whole story of Nathu, a deep melancholy descended.

"The longer one tries to serve this country," pronounced the Governor, shaking his head, "the more convinced does one become that India is for ever an insoluble enigma."

And that, we agreed, was the simple truth.

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## AN UNOFFICIAL AFFAIR

It is not in the province of a Military Secretary to take any open part in the affairs of world-politik; yet there came a time during the now famous Las Khelas boundary dispute when Rollie Dennistoun, at the imminent risk of his life, and of what was even more to him than his life, his official reputation, took a desperate and sensational hand in the settlement of that question which for so many months had been endangering the peace of Central Asia—and which from its very nature, was so baffling to the orthodox canons of diplomacy.

The Governor—small wonder—was exasperated beyond endurance by the absurdity of the *impasse* in which he found himself.

“The whole thing would be childish in the extreme, if it were not pregnant with such terrible possibilities,” he said fretfully to Rollie and me, where we sat with him in his private sanctum on an evening before another plenary sitting of the delegates. “Although Shunkamar is an independent and semi-barbarous hill state,” he continued irritably, “we are compelled by our tradition to conduct these negotiations as though we were treating with a civilised and responsible power.”

The Governor frowned severely in his irritation. “Yet there is no astuter diplomat than that very charming and unscrupulous old rogue, the Maharajah of Shunkamar. He was educated in England, he is a scholar of considerable parts, and he is acutely aware of the predicament in which we are placed. He knows, no one better, that his preposterous claim has not a vestige of foundation in reason or in equity—and yet, and yet”—the Governor’s temper got almost out of control—“by sheltering behind the veil of an age-old and, to us, ridiculous superstition, this little hedge-sparrow chieftain is able to jeopardise the stability of the world’s peace!”

Rollie smiled. The most unexpected things sometimes seemed to strike him as humorous.

"Yes, sir," he said, "for the time being, at any rate, the old fox has got us cold. The Northern Power, of course, are paying him enormous sums to keep the farce going. Nothing would suit *them* better than to get us embroiled in a war with the hill states."

The Governor crashed his fist on the table.

"All the same it is unthinkable that we should let down Las Khelas," he said in stern tones of finality. "The Empire has no stauncher ally. No, Rollie," crash went the fist again, "rather than betray those gallant Rajputs, I would go to war with Shunkamar—even though," he added with impressive solemnity, "such a step might result in far-reaching consequences that no man dare calculate."

"And so, sir," said Rollie with a light shrug of the shoulders, "the vicious circle goes on circling. That brings us to exactly the point we started from over three months ago!"

For my own part I was overjoyed to hear that the Governor had no intention of letting down Las Khelas. As Commandant of His Excellency's Bodyguard I did not usually bother my head with the intricacies of the Central Asian question. That was the job of the Political Department. But so intense was the excitement which had rapidly been growing over this boundary *impasse*, so menacing the war-cloud which already lowered over those wild frontier hills, and, above all, so warm the friendship which I had struck up with Prince Prithvi Raj—the heir-apparent of Las Khelas, and his father's emissary at the Boundary Conference—that I had got Rollie to explain to me in broad outline the points of that explosive situation.

Very briefly it amounted to this. The Northern Power, with a view to supplanting us, was ceaselessly and insidiously working to embarrass our position in India. Between its boundless territories and the marches of India lay the impassable rampart of the Frontier Hills: through which there was but one strategic passage, to wit, the Las Khelas Pass. This Pass, of course, since time immemorial, had lain in the keeping of the

loyal and warlike people of Las Khelas. What then, was the consternation in diplomatic circles when it became known that the adjoining and no less warlike state of Shunkamar had, by a surprise night attack, crossed the Las Khelas border and seized that all-important Pass? It had long been notorious that Shunkamar was in the pay of that sinister Northern Power, to whom ingress to India was now open. Had Las Khelas instantly attempted to recover their possession by force of arms, the Northern Power would without any doubt have leaped at the excuse of themselves occupying the Pass—ostensibly to aid their protégé. In this extremely delicate situation Government urgently bade Las Khelas refrain from hostilities, and summoned both states to a conference at Mahdipur. Burning with justifiable wrath Prince Prithvi Raj had come to represent his father and his people.

Meanwhile, when the Conference had met and Thakur Rao Malavya, the Grand Vizier and plenipotentiary of Shunkamar, had sternly been called upon to account for his Master's conduct, he blandly announced that the Shunkamaris had acted under the explicit decree of Paraswarmavatti, the tutelary deity of Shunkamar!

"Speaking through the mouth of his high-priest," declared the Vizier in accents of child-like innocence, "our Godhead hath ordained that we retake the Pass. Before recorded time," saith our Godhead, "before ever the Rajputs were, that Pass was to us of Shunkamar. What was ours, is ours. Take up again by strength the possession, and woe unto such as may question the high decree of Paraswarmavatti. Ye all know," continued the picturesquely clad Vizier to the dumbfounded assembly, "that the word of Paraswarmavatti, manifested through the inspired tongue of his high-priest, is our law. So long, we say, as our Godhead sits beneath his golden dome, will Shunkamar endure: and only so long as we obey his law, will our Godhead remain seated beneath his dome of gold."

This, Rollie had explained to me, was the extraordinary situation with which Government was faced. The people of Las Khelas were foaming with rage at such a palpable piece of trickery; and yet there could be no

doubt that the primitive Shunkamaris, duped by their crafty chieftain, and their chieftain's crafty high-priest, believed implicitly in the decree of their Deity. And it was, as the Maharajah of Shunkamar well knew, an unalterable principle of our Government in no way to violate religious susceptibilities. Were Government now, in the obvious course of justice, to depart from this principle, none could say where the conflagration of fanaticism might end.

I looked with solicitude on the troubled face of the Governor, on whose shoulders lay the burden of this dilemma.

"The confounded old scoundrel!" he fumed, "there's no more enlightened man living than Shunkamar. It's nothing more than a barefaced piece of duplicity."

"It's really deliciously humorous," smiled Rollie, "when you consider that this is the twentieth century. How the old rascal must be chuckling up his sleeve. Of course he's as clever as they make 'em, but—" there crept into Rollie's voice that lazy purring drawl which boded little good for his enemies, "like many clever men, our friend is apt to be *too* clever. Soon, if we can keep the negotiations going, he'll over-reach himself—and then, by gad, we'll have him!"

Rollie had, as usual, predicted accurately. The very next day His Highness of Shunkamar did over-reach himself; over-reached himself in a manner that brought in its train the most startling developments, and which opened up a way which no other man I know excepting Rollie, would have had the dazzling intrepidity to take, or the imaginative vision to carry through to such an astounding conclusion.

I suppose it was because my nerves, like everybody else's, were on edge from the protracted strain of the negotiations, that I spoke sharply to Glory van Tuyl, the American girl who was spending some weeks at Government House.

As I was clanking along the veranda in the full dress scarlet and gold turban, heavily laced kurta, white breeches, and big shiny boots of the Bodyguard, to mount ceremonial guard over the Council Chamber, I ran into Glory dressed in riding kit.

"Good morning, Jumbo," she greeted me cheerily, "I'm going for a canter out towards the Border—to have a look at this country of Shunkamar there's such a fuss about."

I felt a sharp spasm of anxiety at her words. Ever since she had arrived, Glory—high-spirited little Glory, with the laughing eyes and aureole of burnished hair—had been, in my infatuated eyes, the only one girl in the world. I had not mentioned this fact to her, because, well, a penniless soldier does not talk about such things to a multi-millionairess. All the same I could not help dreaming my dreams; and now, knowing the madcap recklessness of her spirit, anxiety perhaps lent a touch of abruptness to my speech.

"You can't go that way, Glory," I said, "the Shunkamaris are still savages, and would kidnap you in a twinkling if they found you wandering about near their border!"

If such a goddess as Glory could be said to have a fault, it was that she was inclined to be a little quick-tempered. She obviously resented my tone of authority.

"Malavya told me it's perfectly safe," she retorted with a toss of her head, "and *he* ought to know, considering he's Grand Vizier of the place."

"Like all the Shunkamaris, Malavya is a blackguard," I replied warmly. "I tell you, you're not to go, Glory."

She trilled a derisive little laugh.

"Since when must I ask *your* permission for what I do, Jumbo?"

And defiantly swinging her riding whip, she walked away down the veranda.

"Suppose I've been making an officious ass of myself as usual," I thought, watching her miserably. "It's all right really. The sentries won't let her cross the Border, even if she tries to."

Yet instinct warned me that it was *not* all right; and it must have been about a couple of hours later, just after I had changed the first guard, that the blow fell. Into the courtyard, at break-neck speed, galloped a mounted constable.

"Sahib!" he shouted, pulling up on his haunches in front of me, "the Miss Sahib—the Miss Sahib . . . ."

"What?" I yelled, already knowing what the answer would be.

"She rode out past our police post—beyond the river——"

"Then why the blazes didn't you stop her?" I cried wildly.

"We shouted, Sahib, we shouted; but the Miss Sahib laughed—laughed, and waved her whip and galloped on across the ford. And ere we could mount and follow, there ran out from the shadow of the hills a band of Shunkamaris—who dragged her from her horse, and vanished again with her into the folds of the hills."

"Oh, God!" I groaned, "little Glory in the hands of those bestial savages!"

I was too horrified to think clearly. Flinging open the doors of the Council Chamber, I strode in, my sword clattering on the tessellated floor, to where the delegates of the Boundary Conference were seated round the central table.

"Your Excellency!" I cried frenziedly to the Governor, "Miss van Tuyl has been carried off across the Border by a gang of Shunkamaris!"

At this terrible announcement there fell a deathly, awe-struck silence. For a moment no one seemed capable of uttering the horror in his mind. Then all eyes turned menacingly towards Rao Malavya, the Grand Vizier of Shunkamar.

That smooth-faced Brahmin alone seemed unperturbed. Not even when the Governor addressed him in stern tones, did he display the slightest trace of discomposure.

"Diwan Sahib," said His Excellency, striving to control his anger, "this is the doing of your people. You will see to it that the lady is restored immediately, and without harm."

None could mistake the menace behind those tones; and my hand went to my sword hilt when the Vizier arose with a deprecating smile.

"In the name of my Master," he said in his silky voice, "I disclaim all responsibility for this affair. As Your Excellency well knows, there are in our hills many turbulent bands of outlaws, over whose actions we have



no control. By such a band, I do assure you, has this outrage been committed. Nevertheless," continued the Vizier with an eloquently suggestive look at Prince Prithvi Raj, who sat opposite to him with dangerously gleaming eyes, "nevertheless, I suggest, if His Highness of Las Khelas will agree to our terms regarding the Pass, it is then not impossible that my Master, not to be outdone in generosity, may achieve the practically impossible, and bring it about that the lady be recovered unharmed." He looked full at Prince Prithvi Raj with subtly challenging eyes. "What says noble Las Khelas? The matter appears to lie with him?"

Even I, familiar with the tortuous ways of oriental diplomacy, was dumbfounded by the cool insolence of this proposal. The thing was blackmail, blackmail of the vilest and most daring sort. As Malavya had said, the doings of all the Border blackguards could not be attributed to his Master. From their acts he could always disassociate himself; and strong in this knowledge Malavya had had the audacity as good as to admit that Glory's abduction was a put up job—and that her safety was held out against the preposterous claim on Las Khelas. I could see that all the members of the Conference were raging impotently against this superbly insolent stroke, and my own fury was at bursting point when the villainous old Vizier again smoothly enquired, "What says noble Las Khelas?"

Prithvi Raj sprang to his feet with flashing eyes; a tall, slight figure of supreme dignity and grace. He was a wonderful fellow in many ways, a Cambridge cricket blue, and imbued to the finger tips with the traditions of ancient Rajput chivalry: and for one vain moment I hoped wildly that he might sacrifice his own interests to save poor Glory. Vain hope. The ire in his voice when he replied to Malavya's question, was one of the most terrifying things I have ever heard. In my agonised ears it sounded like the striking of Glory's death knell.

"No!" he cried in deep, rich tones that resounded through the lofty chamber. "I am sent here by my great Father to demand justice for our people. With less

than justice will I never be content. I stand here as the mouthpiece of our people. Even though the honour of my own sister stood between me and our people's right, I would not abate that demand by one jot or tittle." He glared at the Vizier with the flaming ferocity of his warlike race. "Think not to move *me* by this ruse of your Master's foul-scheming mind!"

In my perturbation I scarcely heard the angry hubbub that had broken out in the assembly. Observing only the Vizier's complaisant shrug and smile, I strode across to where Rollie, in the blue and gold of his hussar uniform, sat a little behind the Governor's chair.

"Rollie," I whispered hoarsely, "while these politicians are talking, Glory will be murdered—or worse. For God's sake *do* something, man—at once!"

To my intense astonishment a dreamy smile of satisfaction flitted over Rollie's face. He spoke in a slow, calm voice.

"I told you, old boy," he drawled, "that Shunkamar would over-reach himself presently—and now he's done it. If I'm not very much mistaken we've got the old fox at last." Then seeing that I was too distracted to take in the meaning of his words, he added with a sympathetic grin, "Don't you worry about Glory, Jumbo—she's much too valuable a pawn in this game to come to any harm—and for the Lord's sake don't go and do anything idiotic till the Conference rises." He patted me on the arm. "Go and wait for me in my quarters."

Scarcely hearing this counsel of comfort and patience, I dashed out of the excited assembly, and on the veranda outside the staff quarters, almost fell over old Muldoo, where he squatted with a basket of fangless snakes and other stock in trade. Seizing him by the scruff of the neck, I dragged him bodily through the *chic* into my room.

"Well," I demanded distractedly, "is this a put up job about the Miss Sahib, or——?"

I broke off not daring to voice the alternative.

The close-shorn old Hindu softly rubbed his neck and looked at me with those eyes that glittered dully like one of his own snake's.

"When a young man loves, Sahib," he said dryly, "the blood becomes quickly over-hot. Be not anxious for the maid—at least, not yet. Come I straight from talk at the Takasli Gate, and, I tell thee, this is the Maharajah of Shunkamar's work—to trap Government into forcing Prithvi Raj."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when the *chic* was swirled aside and Prince Prithvi Raj himself strode in. He had come straight from the Conference dressed in his long velvet robe of state, with jewelled scimitar thrust through the sash, and a tall aigrette clasped to the front of his silken turban by a flashing gem. Never, I think, had I seen a man so angry.

"Carstairs," he burst out in his strong, rich voice, "you heard my answer in the Council Chamber? I spoke then as the representative of Las Khelas. I speak to you now as a man. Hitherto I have borne with Shunkamar's chicanery in the confidence that Government would redress our wrong. But this last personal affront on my honour," the fiery Rajput's eyes flashed like the great brilliant in his turban, "I will not endure. Shunkamar now tries to put on *me* the onus of Miss van Tuyl's fate! I go straight to cram the insult down his brazen throat." His voice dropped to a calmer note, and he laid a hand on my shoulder. "And because we have played polo and shot in the jungles together, Carstairs—and because—I think—Miss van Tuyl's safety is very dear to you, I come to offer you a part in my revenge?"

Looking on the dark, aquiline features of the noble Rajput—set now in steely lines of inextinguishable anger—I knew unerringly that the enterprise would be, if fate required, unto the death. My heart bounded with joy. My commission, my career, my prospects of the future, could all take care of themselves. I was a starkly elemental man who had been robbed of his woman. I asked no questions. I held out my hand.

"Your Highness, I'm with you to the end."

He clasped it in a burning grip.

"Away then, there's not a moment to be lost."

"One second," I said, "I'll just leave a note for Rollie."

Dashing into Rollie's quarters, which were next to mine, I scribbled hastily on a piece of paper on his desk.

"Have gone with Prithvi Raj to rescue Glory from Shunkamar."

And then, just as we were, the Prince in his robes of state, and I in full dress uniform, each with the addition of our pistols, we sprang into his waiting Daimler and raced through the town, out onto the garrison aerodrome.

There was only one safe, sure and rapid way of reaching Shunkamar, which lay far away back in the impenetrable fastness of the hills, and that way was by air. Prithvi Raj was an enthusiastic pilot, having won considerable distinction in that capacity during the war; and his private machine, in which he constantly flew to and from his home during the sitting of the Conference, was housed with the R.A.F. squadron. Our gorgeously appavelled departure, therefore, caused little comment among the mechanics.

Only when we had risen to several thousand feet, and the grim panorama of the hills rapidly unfolded beneath the roaring onrush of our propeller, did I begin to realise how rash our undertaking was. We were tearing, a hundred miles an hour, straight into the heart of a hostile and semi-barbarous country, hurling ourselves, as it were, into the lion's jaws. But the thought that somewhere in that welter of labyrinthine chaos down below, poor Glory was a captive, drove all misgivings from my mind. At all hazards, Glory must be rescued. How her rescue was to be effected, I had not as yet the faintest glimmering of an idea. No doubt Prithvi Raj had his plan, and if we were daring enough, fate, I knew, would point the way. And thinking thus, I felt the 'plane already nose-diving into the spirals of descent.

Below, on the table-topped plateau of a lofty eminence, I saw with a thrill, the massive mud-walled battlements of Shunkamar Palace; and, as the 'plane dropped swiftly to the open *maidan* outside the gates, dark swarms of people rushing out of the surrounding dwellings and gazing upward in excited astonishment at the aerial visitor.

A moment before Prithvi Raj made his perfect landing, he shouted something to me over his shoulder, but what it was I could not hear above the roar of the engine and the shouting of the Shunkamaris.

"Now," said Prithvi Raj, when the machine had come to a standstill on *terra firma*, and the crowd, scared at first, rushed yelling towards us, "so far, so good. Leave the talking to me. *Ohé*, there!" leaping out onto the ground, he spoke in commanding tones to a long-haired Shunkamari warrior, "we come on urgent business with thy Maharajah. Conduct us to the palace."

"Aye," grinned the Shunkamari, "our Maharajah will doubtless have something to say to *thee*, who come thus uninvited on his territory. This way then, ye bright-plumed birds of Paradise!"

Virtually as prisoners, I could not help thinking, we were escorted by the tumultuous and fast-growing rabble, towards a broad, flat terrace beyond the castle gates, upon which I could distinguish an even greater crowd.

"Ye come timely," grinned our hawk-nosed guide, "the Maharajah holds *darbar*."

So it was. According to eastern custom the Maharajah sat throned on that terrace, holding open court, to which his most lowly subject had the right of attendance. The throng, loudly-murmuring in their excitement, parted to let us through. And as we came out into the roped-off enclosure where the Maharajah sat surrounded by his courtiers, His Highness's face broke into a smile.

"Ah," he said in excellent English, "our Cousin of Las Khelas! I thought I recognised your famous aeroplane. And Captain Carstairs, too, of Government House. Dear me, this is delightful. But really, really, my dear fellows, you should have given me notice of this pleasure, so that I might have made proper arrangements for your reception."

I had, of course, previously met this old scoundrel on his official visits to Government House. He was a clean-shaven, parchment-skinned little skeleton of a man, with twinkling brown eyes, and the very uneastern peculiarity of a snub nose. Prince Prithvi Raj was not to be diverted by the mock-courtesy of his welcome. In the blazing

splendour of his robes, uneclipsed by the gorgeousness of the Maharajah's own, he strode up to the sardonic old mummy on the throne.

"You know why we are here," he thundered. "Where is Miss van Tuyl?"

Shunkamar regarded the angry figure with twinkling eyes.

"One minute, my dear fellow," he said smiling, "is this visit—ah, *offeercial*?"

"No," cried Prithvi Raj, with his hand on his scimitar, "I have come as man to blackguard!"

"Ah, good, good!" the Maharajah continued to smile amiably, "then we can talk with freedom." He clapped his hands and gave a sharp order to one of his attendants. "Let the lady be brought here."

So great was my delight when the castle gates swung open and Glory, Glory surrounded by a strong guard, but still in riding kit and obviously unharmed, was conducted onto the terrace, that I forgot entirely the perilous situation we were in. And as her eyes fell on me and she started, as though out of an incredible nightmare, I saw in those eyes a look which emboldened me for anything that might befall.

"Keep your heart up, Glory," I whispered as she passed, "we've come to take you home!"

The Maharajah made her an elaborate bow.

"So beautiful a lady must have an eye for scenery," he said, with a peculiarly suggestive intonation. "Lead her to the edge of the escarpment, where she may admire the rock-torn torrent, five thousand feet sheer below—while we talk here." Then with a courteous gesture to Prithvi Raj, as Glory's escort ranged themselves around her on the brink of that terrible precipice.

"Yes, Cousin, speaking remember, *unoffeercially*, I confess to you that the lady is my not very willing guest. How long she remains so," the wicked old brown eyes twinkled, "I have no doubt my trusty Malavya has already intimated?"

Suddenly a pistol was glittering in Prithvi Raj's hand. "Stand back!" he roared at the crowd, which, at sight of his weapon, surged forward clamourously. "If a man

moves towards me, or a guard behind there levels his rifle, your Maharajah, I swear to you, is a dead man. Now then, old fox," he blazed out at Shunkamar himself, "if you at all value your life, listen carefully. Firstly, you will immediately permit my friend Carstairs to send a wireless message to Mahdipur that Miss van Tuyl is safe, and to bid them send an aeroplane to fetch her. Secondly, since you have acted 'unofficially' in abducting Miss van Tuyl, I also will act unofficially. We are wearied of your scurrilous attempt to cheat us out of the Pass; and you will send a further message to the Governor that you are re-ceding it immediately."

The old mummy airily shrugged his shoulders.

"But my dear Cousin, if for reasons of public policy I am unable to accede to your very reasonable requests?"

Prithvi Raj's pistol pointed steadily at his heart.

"In that case," he said, and there was the ring of death in his voice, "the world will be richer by your departure from it."

"Tut, tut," Shunkamar smiled amusedly, "though I am an old man I find life very pleasant, and am loath to leave it. But as you are aware, Cousin, I am the servant of my people; you will permit me to consult them?"

Without waiting for the answer he raised his hand and began to speak, in guttural vernacular.

"My Shunkamaris! the Prince of Las Khelas declares that we lay false claim to our ancient Pass. He declares that the word of Paraswarmavatti, spoken through the mouth of his high-priest, is false. He declares further that if we withdraw not the claim, he will even now take my life with the pistol that ye see in his hand."

The old chieftain spoke in a lightly ironical manner, with eyebrows humorously arched. But never shall I forget the terrible uproar that greeted his words. Amid the tumult there sprang out into the open space before the throne, a loathsome apparition—an ash-smeared figure, stark naked, with filth-matted hair, frenziedly gesticulating.

"Silence!" roared all the rabble together, "hear the

words of our high-priest—hear the inspired words of Paraswarmavatti's minister!" Foaming at the mouth and with epileptically rolling eyeballs, that ghastly figure snarled and screamed like a rabid animal.

"Who be these strangers?" he screeched, "that dare mock our God-head, and make a mock of Paraswarmavatti's dread decree? Let them be dragged hence, bound, to the golden dome, and the stench of their sacrilege exiated in the rising smoke of their entrails and their blood."

"Aye, away with them, away with them to the altar of the golden dome!" yelled the mob frantically. And nothing, I am convinced, but Prithvi Raj's pistol and mine pressing against Shunkamar's body, saved us from their barbarous rage. And when, still clamouring like a pack of hungry wolves, they stood at bay in obedience to a quick order of their chieftain, he spoke to me with a triumphant smile.

"My priest and my people are a little old-fashioned, Carstairs, but you see how the matter stands? Our gallant Cousin thought he could bring off this *coup* by the threat of my life. But if he were to take my life"—the old man waved his hand suggestively towards the snarling crowd—"it would not, I think, be benefecial for either of your healths—or for Miss van Tuyl's!"

"He's bluffing," I muttered to Prithvi Raj, and the Prince himself demanded sharply.

"Come, enough of this—your answer, Shunkamar? Must I shoot you, or do you comply?"

There could be no doubt that Prithvi Raj intended to carry through his ultimatum. But still the old chieftain smiled in his most amiable manner.

"The answer, my dear fellow, is in the negative."

"Is that final?" cried Prithvi Raj, finger on trigger.

"Absolutely, Cousin. Shoot, I beg you. Maybe," he continued nodding and smiling, "we shall make some part of the journey together, you and Carstairs, and I—and Miss van Tuyl—to our different Abodes of Bliss. It will be interesting, Carstairs, to compare——"

"To Hades with you, then!"

With an infuriated oath Prithvi Raj began to press the



trigger. Over the heads of the crowd, I caught a glimpse of Glory's face. A clammy sweat broke out all over me. In a flash I saw that Prithvi Raj, for all his splendid daring, had been defeated by the calm courage of old Shunkamar. I struck up the Prince's pistol.

"Stop!" I muttered, to kill him will only be murdering Glory as well as us—and it won't do your country any good." And while Prithvi Raj hesitated in face of this palpable fact, I spoke hurriedly to the Maharajah himself. "The question of the Pass," I said, "will be settled by the Conference. We are concerned only about Miss van Tuyl. I shall now send that wireless message for an aeroplane in which to take her away, and we will then depart."

Only then did I begin to understand the quiet air of triumph which had characterised the old fox's demeanour since our arrival.

"Not so fast, Carstairs, not so fast," he murmured courteously, "I did not think, I confess, that I had much to learn from my Cousin Prithvi—but he has taught me a lesson in unoffeicial procedure."

While we glowered at him with raised pistols, he gave a few rapid orders in the vernacular. A shout went up from the crowd; it parted between us and Glory—and Glory was held by her captors at about five paces from the edge of the escarpment.

"Now," said he to the Prince, "it is commonly boasted that the word of Prithvi Raj is as inviolable as the Rajput's triple cordon. Therefore, I will ask you, Cousin, to make a public declaration here, that you renounce the Pass. Your word being pledged, Captain Carstairs shall send his message for that other aeroplane."

It was some seconds before the significance of this appalling turn of the tables sank into my horrified senses. Prithvi Raj, who knew Shunkamar better than I, was, I think, the first to grasp it.

"You mean?" he said in a low voice.

"I mean, Cousin, that Miss van Tuyl is standing five paces from a precipice of five thousand feet. I will give you five minutes—and each minute the lady will be led

one pace nearer to the edge." He smiled ironically. "It is now *my* turn to say, 'come, your answer?' "

When I saw how hopelessly we were caught, my knees nearly gave way. I knew that the old chieftain who had not hesitated at the sacrifice of his own life, would certainly not stop short at Glory's, to achieve his end. It was like some diabolical game of poker, with no limit, bar the sky.

"Your answer, Cousin?"

"No!" cried Prithvi Raj, on a terrible note, "no!"

"One!" counted the Maharajah quietly in the vernacular, while I stood stark-paralysed with horror.

Up till that moment I do not think that Glory, still dazed with the fatigue and terror of her incredible experience, and unable to understand most of the extraordinary scene that had been going on before her eyes, was at all conscious of her own danger. But she had, as I have said, a temper, and when the guards dragged her a pace backwards, this mercifully came to her aid, to the exclusion of more terrible emotions. She gave the Maharajah a piece of her mind.

"Look at here," she stormed at him, angrily stamping on the ground, "I'm about through with your fooling. I reckon this joke has gone far enough. You'll arrange to have me and my friends sent back to Mahdipur at once—or the U.S.A. will have something to say to this comic tin-pot state of yours, which I guess you'd rather not hear." She strained away from the guards. "Now then, call off these mangy curs."

The Maharajah made her another elaborate bow.

"Charming lady," he said blandly, "we are only what you call a semibarbaric people—beyond the pale, as you say—and therefore not accountable for our actions. Also, if the Prince is not gallant enough quickly to make a small sacrifice for beauty in distress," he shrugged his shoulders whimsically, "I regret to tell you that it will never be known outside these hills how a citizeness of your great and progressive country was dashed to fragments on those rocks below." He glanced at his jewelled wrist-watch and counted again.

"Two!"

Again, amid a howl of exultation from the mob, they dragged her back a pace. Glory at last realised the imminence of her peril.

"Jumbo," she cried out to me, "they can't—can't mean it?"

"Three," came the gentle tones of the Maharajah's count. It was Prithvi Raj who now seemed paralysed. I called out wildly to the relentless potentate.

"You'll be dead—but your people will have to answer for this to *our* Government—and God help them, then!"

His eyebrows arched a fraction.

"Captain Carstairs and the Prince," he replied with calm satire, "regrettably perished in an air crash over our hills. Poor Miss van Tuyl, who was captured by Border ruffians, we know nothing of." He counted again.

"Four!"

Glory was now on the extreme brink of that terrible abyss. Unspeakable horror stared out of her eyes. She knew, we all knew, that there was less than a minute now between her and hideous death. She cried to me imploringly.

"Save me, Jumbo, oh, save me, if you're a man!"

Wildly I clutched the Prince's arm.

"For God's sake, give in," I beseeched him, "you can't be so inhuman."

Such torture as his can never have been depicted on a human face before. But in that instant while Prithvi Raj, with hell in his eyes, looked from Glory to the smiling Maharajah—in that fateful instant while all our lives trembled on the brink of eternity, I suddenly heard the sweetest music of my life—the familiar, rhythmic throbbing of an engine.

"Look! oh, look!" I yelled ecstatically, pointing upward to where the little dragon-fly appeared sailing over the Takt-i-Tor.

The effect was magical. The guards released their hold of Glory. Every eye in that huge crowd gazed upward, riveted on the 'plane that came swiftly sweeping overhead. And a sudden shout of wonderment arose when a black speck dropped from the fusilage, fell some feet like a plummet, and then checked, as the voluminous canopy

of the parachute bellied gracefully out against the up-rushing resistance of the air.

Right in the middle of the crowd he alighted, this bolt from the blue; and it was, as I had known from the first, Rollie Dennistoun.

Disengaging the rope from his shoulders, he strode with clanking sword straight up to the Maharajah's throne. Still in uniform, he had clearly set out the minute he saw my note. No words can describe my joy at the sight of his slight, delicately-featured form; at the inspiring presence of the finest man I had ever known: and I shouted to him in my despair.

"Rollie, if Las Khelas doesn't give up the Pass, they're going to throw Glory over the precipice!"

"Oh no, they're not!" he glanced at Glory with a reassuring smile.

"Ah, my dear friend, Major Dennistoun!" exclaimed the Maharajah, outwardly suave as ever, but with a perceptible change of colour. He knew that in Rollie he had encountered daring as brilliant as Prithvi Raj's, and intellect as keen as his own. "Is *your* visit also, may I ask, unofficial?"

"Very much so." There was a grim note in Rollie's laugh as he stood debonairly, one hand on his sword, and pointed upward with the other to the wheeling plane. "Watch, all of you," he said in Shunkamari, "Ah, there!"

As he spoke a swift gleam slipped from under the machine and plunged with lightning velocity into the bottom of the valley below.

*Cr-r-rash!*

As the bomb burst on impact with a huge dull-red glare of flame, and a great black fountain of earth spouted skyward, we felt the earth shake beneath our feet from the violence of the explosion. For some moments its angry roar echoed and re-echoed around the valleys of the hills. With one terrified impulse the primitive Shunkamaris threw themselves face downward on the ground. It was their first experience of this dreadful form of wrath.

"Now," said Rollie, addressing the cowering multi-

tude, "that is but a foretaste. The rest lies with your Maharajah. At the end of a few minutes another will fall—nearer, this time, to the abode of your Godhead."

He pointed to where the golden cupola of Paraswarmavatti's temple blazed like a flame in the sun.

"What, ye crawl and shake? Listen then to me. Your law saith that Shunkamar endureth only so long as Paraswarmavatti remains seated under his golden dome. Therefore are ye now in great danger of extinction. For your perjured priest hath put false words in the mouth of the Godhead, seeking to acquire by guile the rightful land of Las Khelas. If ye would atone this blasphemy and save your Godhead and yourselves—ah, look, once more!"

Yet closer to earth they grovelled and moaned, as another bomb exploded with its shattering detonation.

"Aye, aye, we would make atonement," the terrified mob wailed frantically, while the Maharajah calmly fitted a cigarette into his holder. The situation had passed out of his hands. "Only say, Sahib, what must we do? what must we do?" they howled all together.

"Let the perjured priest stand forth," commanded Rollie.

"Aye, he shall answer for the sin," they shouted, pushing the trembling filth-smeared figure into the open.

"Speak!" commanded Rollie, "ye have just witnessed the beginning of a wrath many times more terrible than the wrath of Paraswarmavatti. Speak now nothing but the truth. Did ye or did ye not interpret truly the edict of your Godhead?"

"Let the priest speak truly," thundered the multitude, "on his life be it that he speak the truth!"

Exposed at last, the wretched creature was overwhelmed by a paroxysm of terror. Unable to articulate, he pitched forward on the ground in hideous convulsions.

"See, ye have your answer!" cried Rollie. "Yet may your Maharajah still avert the doom by recalling his men of war from the Pass. If this be not done, what ye have already seen is but a little firework to the hail of destruction that shall fall upon the golden dome, and—lest the fulfilment of your law be tardy—upon yourselves

and your city also. Ask now your Maharajah whether I signal yon winged destroyer in the sky to hold his hand or no."

The panic that broke out among the terrified tribesmen at these words was altogether indescribable.

"Bid him make the signal, Maharaj," they yelled. "We withdraw from the Pass. The priest shall answer on the altar for his perjury. Aye, he shall answer, and let the feringhees and the Prince go their way. Save us, save thy people, Maharaj!"

Rollie turned to the chieftain, who answered with a smile.

"My people, I am afraid, are hardly worthy of their ruler. But I am, above all things, my dear Dennistoun, a constitutional sovereign; and," he added with a touch of sarcasm, "it appears to be their will that I agree to your terms. Let me congratulate you sincerely on a very smart piece of work."

None of us could help smiling at the old man's superb coolness.

"Unofficial acts," said Rollie to him, "are dangerous things. One is apt to lead to another, you know, Maharajah Sahib. If you hadn't kidnapped Miss van Tuyt . . . But we will now adjourn to your wireless for some official work. They will be glad to hear in Mahdipur that we are all well, and," he added with a chuckle, "that you have agreed so amicably to the settlement of the boundary dispute at last."

As usual, Rollie had saved the situation. While the bombing 'plane still circled overhead, and he and the Maharajah and Prithvi Raj despatched those messages which were to rejoice the world, I attended to poor Glory. What we had to say to each other, however, had nothing whatever to do with the boundary settlement.

When, a little later, the R.A.F. Flight arrived to escort us home, we heard a terrific hullabaloo proceeding from the golden temple.

"Ah, Dennistoun," I heard the Maharajah say with whimsical regret to Rollie as he climbed into his seat, "my poor priest! I fear it may be long before I find another so, so, how shall I say it, ah, so so—obliging!"

## THE TREASURE OF SUNARA

It was during the Las Khelas boundary negotiations, while Prince Prithvi Raj of Las Khelas was our guest at Government House, that there befell that thing which accounts for my first grey hair. Rollie Dennistoun was rude to me about it—and than Rollie no one could be ruder on occasion. And though I loved that long, strong, great-hearted superman beyond the love of women, I had meant to have it out with him afterwards as man to man only it happened that, before the ghastly night was ended, I felt more like grovelling on the earth and licking his boots. However, to start at the beginning. . . .

I was having a drink in Rollie's quarters one evening after polo, when there was a sharp rap on the door, and Prince Prithvi Raj strode in. He was still in lather-splashed polo kit, was the Prince, and I fairly jumped out of my chair, for although we had by that time become close friends, I had never before seen his handsome face so powerfully agitated. He glanced quickly around the room.

"Rollie?" he exclaimed, "where's Rollie Dennistoun?"

"Rollie's with His Ex.," I said, startled by his appearance. "What the dickens is up, Prince?"

He stood for some moments, a slight, distinguished figure, scrutinising me with his big, dark, piercing eyes, before he replied.

"I can't wait for him, then—there's no time to lose. Can I rely utterly on your discretion, Jumbo?" And before I could answer, he broke into his rare smile and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I know I can, my friend, forgive me for asking so absurd a question."

Now this is my defence which afterwards I urged to Rollie when he called me unpolite things for what followed : namely, that Prithvi Raj was a splendid fellow, a gallant sportsman, with a charm and a glamour about him that disarmed all ordinary judgments. And just the way he showed his trust in me then, would have made almost anyone go with him to glory.

" You know, Jumbo," he said, in his deep, rich accents, " that when the Moghul Empire was falling asunder, before the conquests of your Lord Lake, we held this province of Mahdipur? You have heard of our lost treasure which was hastily concealed when the Rohillas defeated us, and drove us again out of these territories—that immense treasure of priceless gems whose clue perished with my ancestor on the battle field?

" Rather," I nodded. Of course I had heard. What schoolboy has not heard of the great Las Khelas treasure which no man has seen since the battle of Amalkhot? What subaltern has ever come out to India without dreaming vain dreams of finding that fabulous, long-hidden hoard? I nodded, and the Prince proceeded with increasing excitement.

" For two centuries my house has been searching for the clue—without success—and here—here, Jumbo"—his voice shook with uncontrollable emotion—" is the clue at last! "

" *What?* " Dizzily I gaped at a piece of flimsy bazaar paper in his trembling hand, scrawled over in the vernacular script.

" That—the clue to the Las Khelas treasure? " I stammered.

" Yes—beyond all doubt. It must have been slipped into my coat pocket while I was playing polo this afternoon. But by whom, none of my suite knows—or will say. Listen, Jumbo."

So staggered was I that he had to read that extraordinary message—couched in flowery oriental phraseology—twice over before I had fully grasped its meaning—and when I had, the room was reeling around me.

For the writer of that message purported—no less—to lead Prithvi Raj to the treasure that self same night. He



claimed, this anonymous writer, to be descendant direct of the noble to whom Prithvi Raj's ancestor had confided the hiding of the treasure on the eve of Amalkhot. He explained with a wealth of detail, which it is unnecessary to repeat, how his forbear had likewise perished in the battle, and how, after all these years the clue had recently, and by what he believed divine dispensation, come into his hands. Himself, with his own eyes, had beheld the treasure in its secret repository, and he was anxious to restore it with all speed.

"Unto the lords of this earth are the treasures of this earth," the writing concluded. "Did I desire the delusion of earthly riches, yet should I dread to touch, lest evil overwhelm me. Faithful am I as that noble, my forbear, who rendered his life for his trust. Therefore, noble Las Khelas, will I lead thee to that which is thine. Under the *peepul* by Sunara Bungalow I await thee to-night at sundown. According to our Law, thou wilt come alone."

Prithvi Raj refolded the paper with fevered fingers. His voice was hoarse with exultation.

"The treasure of my ancestors, Jumbo," he cried. "Our treasure—at last!"

I still stared at him in bewilderment, overcome by the immensity of the occasion. True, the message sounded perfectly plausible. Prithvi Raj's exultation, the romance of discovering that vast treasure, was setting my blood on fire. And yet, somehow, I couldn't help being a little sceptical. It seemed rather too wonderful—like dreaming you've won the Derby sweep; though of course *somebody* must win that. And Prithvi Raj, I recollected uneasily, was the one, strong, upright figure towering above the weltering intrigue of the boundary negotiations. There were many reasons why others of the parties concerned in those negotiations would not regret his demise. Thrilled though I was, I didn't altogether like it.

"But Prince," I faltered out my doubts, "you're sure this isn't just a cock-and-bull story?—with—I mean—with some unhealthy motive?"

Prithvi Raj smiled his winning smile.

"I was expecting you to say that, Jumbo. No, my friend," his voice took on a deep and earnest note, "you don't know—no white man knows—this strange India of ours. With my inborn knowledge of our people, I read truth in every line of this letter. It is the characteristic action of a high-born Rajput, proud of his race, proud of his forbear's faithfulness. Things that might seem far stranger than this to you westerners are happening every day in India. I understand my people, Jumbo, and I am certain that this man deems it his religious duty to restore to me the treasure."

So emphatic an assurance rang in the Prince's utterance that I was, in spite of myself, almost convinced. I felt that helplessness of the white man on the brink of India's ageless and unfathomable mystery—my judgment obscured by the gloom of that mysterious abyss whose shadow none but a native-born can ever hope to penetrate. But I still made a show of protesting.

"If the man's genuine, Prince, why does he want you to go alone?"

Prithvi Raj laughed again.

"It is our Law, old sceptic, that only the King, or the King's son may accompany the treasurer to the treasure of the King. That is our immutable tradition, and I should certainly have mistrusted this unknown benefactor if he had not so stipulated."

I saw the Prince's mind was made up, and I couldn't help being glad of it—for I was thrilled to the core: yet I felt it my duty to make one more effort to dissuade him.

"It may be all right," I argued, "but suppose anything did go wrong—it would be damned hard lines on the Governor, and all of us responsible for your safety here—not to mention playing old Harry with the boundary negotiations. I ask you, Prince, is it worth risking all that for the sake of a problematical treasure?"

Prithvi Raj drew himself up with lofty dignity. No words can express the passionate enthusiasm of his reply.

"That treasure is worth hundreds of years of our revenue, Jumbo. If I recover it, our dearest dreams

will come true. We can complete the great Parumina irrigation system. We can lay the line of rail from Torbhet to Kharagan. Think of it, man! we can make our people the most prosperous in the whole north-west!" He seized my arm in a grip that thrilled me through with the power of his passion. "Jumbo," he cried, "if you were me, would *you* hesitate? Would *you* put paltry fears of your own life before these great aims?"

What more was there to say? His flaming ardour had swept me off my feet. I wrung his outstretched hand.

"Good luck, Prince," I cried. "I'd give my soul to be going with you."

"Thanks, Jumbo. Make some excuse to His Ex. for my absence from dinner." And before I properly knew whether I was standing on my head or my heels, he was gone.

And it was while I was still standing in front of the fireplace in half-dazed contemplation of the Prince's solitary and incredible enterprise, that old Rollie sauntered in. In spite of his spacious air of large and easy strength, I saw at a glance that he was worried.

"We've got to keep our eyes skinned, old lad," he said, dropping lazily into a chair. "Simla have properly got the wind up about Prithvi Raj. We've just been deciphering a wireless transmitted from the Resident at Las Khelas. It's like this——"

A deadly chill crept over me as Rollie drawled out the gist of that wire. Prithvi Raj's stepmother, it seemed, was a lady of such praiseworthy maternal passions that she would stop at nothing to secure her own hopeful son's succession to the throne. But the people of Las Khelas idolised Prithvi Raj, the Heir Apparent, and within their own boundaries not even that exemplary mother would dare to take any of those steps by which, in oriental states, a rival is apt to come to a mysterious and premature end. But now, if ever, while he was far away, in our territory, was the amiable Maharanee's chance, for then not even the most hot-headed partisan could impute the guilt to her.

"And," concluded Rollie, "the Resident is convinced

she's going to have a shot at doing in Prithvi Raj while he's here. He says our spies can't get hold of anything definite—just an impalpable whisper from behind the *purdahs*, that's all. But he's positive there's going to be an attempt; and as nothing could be more fatal just now to the peace of Central Asia than Prithvi Raj's death—here, as our guest—he implores us to be careful. Cheery, eh? ”

During Rollie's recital my mouth had gone bone-dry. It was one thing to believe in the treasure story when intoxicated by the mysterious and oriental magnetism of Prithvi Raj's personality : it was quite another under the steady gaze of Rollie's calm, grey eyes.

“ Oh, Lord ! ” I groaned, “ what a hyphenated fool I've been ! ”

“ Impossible ! ” said Rollie with a grin, “ what's the trouble, anyhow ? ”

And it was then, after I had stammered out as best I could what had just passed in that room—after I had told Rollie of Prithvi Raj's immovable belief in the genuineness of his ancestral treasure, and of his departure, alone, to seek it, that Rollie delivered himself of those verbal bouquets to which I have already alluded. Actually he didn't say very much, but what he did say was pungently to the point—leaving me in no doubt as to the depth of my folly.

“ Oh, Jumbo, Jumbo,” he ended up, “ are there *no* limits to the thickness of your head? Why in heaven's name didn't you lock him up, sit on his head, send for the police—*anything* to keep him out of that obvious trap? But it's no use talking, while the man's going to—to God knows what.” He bounded for the door. “ Come on, hurry like hell, old lad.”

“ One minute,” I protested, nettled by his words. “ I may be every kind of a fool, but Prithvi Raj is not—far from it. He knows his own country, and he's absolutely certain this is a true bill. There's more in this show than meets the white man's eye. Let's ask Muldoo what he thinks before we do anything rash.”

“ All right—quickly then.”

Agreeing reluctantly, Rollie lifted the *chic* and called

softly into the compound; whence the old Hindu glided into the room like a silent, uncanny spirit of the East; and Rollie came directly to the point.

“Do *you* know anything about the legendary Las Khelas treasure?” he asked sharply.

It didn’t need much of an eye to see that Muldoo did know—knew a good deal. There were few things in that dark Indian underworld which is made up in fairly equal parts of mythology, superstition, and lurid crime, that old Muldoo did not know about. And it was obvious that he did not relish this particular subject. His dark eyes glittered strangely, and he spoke with hesitation.

“A little, Sahib—but,” he fretted with the knot of his *dhoti*, and there was that in his voice which redoubled my uneasiness, “I desire to know no more.”

“You believe the treasure does exist then?”

Rollie’s question was abrupt, and the old Hindu—who loved Rollie beyond words—eyed him nervously.

“If thou wilt heed old Muldoo,” he said earnestly, “thou wilt think no more of this treasure.” And he added with startling solemnity: “There are things in Hind, Sahib, which are best left to Hind.”

Now murder and sudden death were trivial incidents to that parchment-skinned old Hindu; no one was less easily scared; yet his words conveyed an inexpressible suggestion of horror. Half-crazed now by my anxiety for Prithvi Raj, and—I confess—by an overwhelming curiosity to learn the mystery behind this treasure, I shook him violently by the arm.

“What the devil do you mean?” I cried. “For the Lord’s sake, speak out.”

“Speak out,” added Rollie more calmly, as the old man stared and stared into space, as though hypnotised by some dark and dreadful vision. “Where is the treasure hidden, Muldoo?”

Muldoo recovered himself with a start.

“Some say one place, some say another. None living know for certain—but——” into his eyes had come an expression of terrible significance, “none seek to find it more. Remember, Sahib,” he added to Rollie, “too

high a price may be paid for a boxful of pretty stones."

Even Rollie's cool nerves were shaken by the sinister suggestiveness of Muldoo's manner. He lost patience.

"Come," he said sternly. "I'll be plain with you. It's not for this treasure, but for Prince Prithvi Raj's safety that we're concerned. Listen."

And when Rollie had briefly repeated the whole amazing story, I shall never forget Muldoo's behaviour. We thought he was going into convulsions.

"Haste after him, Sahibs," he wailed, "haste, oh, haste—and stop him ere he approach the treasure—else is the Prince lost. Aye," he beat his fists wildly against his breast, "many times worse than lost!"

"We go at once," said Rollie peremptorily, "but first, tell us what you know of the treasure—d'you hear?"

There was no disobeying Rollie when he spoke like that; and then at last old Muldoo laid bare the gibbering terror in his soul; which after all, as so often happens in India, amounted to nothing—nothing tangible, that is, though to us who knew the East a little, his words suggested unimaginable and nameless possibilities.

"Many times in my lifetime," Muldoo faltered, scarce above a whisper, "have men gone forth thinking they had solved the secret of the treasure. Once only did a man return, and——" his voice dropped to a yet lower note, "'twere better for him that he too had shared the others' fate."

"How so?"

Breathless I waited to hear what had befallen this treasure-seeker who Muldoo thought would have been better dead. But for long moments Muldoo appeared incapable of speech, and when at last speech came, it was not illuminating.

"I have seen men mad, Sahib—many times——; but never a madness like to that man's madness. The image of Fear abode in his crazy eyes——" Muldoo put a hand over his own eyes, as though to shut out some monstrous vision, "and day and night till he perished with the red foam on his lips, he strove with some nameless Thing crying aloud in his torment for pity, offering his soul for peace. Never, Sahibs, have I seen aught half so terrible

as the torment of that horror-stricken man. And to that same doom," he wailed, wringing his hands, "the Prince is even now going. Oh, haste, Sahibs, if ye would save him."

Muldoo rocked moaning on his heels, while Rollie and I exchanged glances. As I have said we knew enough of the East to understand the gravity underlying this fantastic story. Rollie hesitated only to ask one more question.

"Think you the Prince is truly being led to the treasure—or into an ambush of the Maharanee's assassins?"

But Muldoo, his astute self again as soon as purely mundane matters of murder were in question, had no doubt whatever.

"Surely to that accursed treasure," he groaned. "The Maharanee, being a princess of this country, may know all and more than we know. By this device can she ensure the Prince's death—a death which none could ascribe to herself. Cunning as a hooded cobra is the Maharanee."

"Sweet woman!" muttered Rollie, waiting no longer.

The thought of this Thing, unknown and deadly, which terrified Muldoo almost into delirium, and to which the Prince was at that moment speeding, lent wings to our urgency.

Just as we were, in polo kit, we seized our pistols, leaped into Rollie's car, and roared out of the city at racing speed.

"Sunara Bungalow, wasn't it?" Rollie enquired, shaving a bullock cart by the fraction of an inch.

I nodded.

"Yes—under the old *peepul* in the compound."

I will not dwell on that breakneck rush through the quickfalling Indian dusk. Our thoughts were too deep for speech. What could be this dire, incomprehensible Thing which terrified men out of man's most potent passion—which inhibited him from satisfying the lust for gold? Were *we* destined, within a little space, to behold this overmastering horror face to face? Were our bodies, after I dared not think what experience, to be seen no

more? Or might we yet be in time to catch Prithvi Raj . . . and remain for ever in blissful ignorance of one more of India's darkest mysteries?

My heart was thumping like a sledge hammer when Rollie pulled up with a crash of brakes outside Sunara *dakh* bungalow. We saw at a glance that the bungalow was, as usual, empty. Prithvi Raj's two-seater glimmered empty also in the bright starlight. Rollie dragged me headlong out of the car.

"Come on, old Jumbo—pistol ready?"

The old, lone *peepul* stretched out ghostly limbs at the far end of the compound. Beneath was only shadowed emptiness. Prithvi Raj had already set out on his fateful quest. . . .

"Too late!" I groaned with a sob in my throat.

But Rollie was already bent double, examining the dewy turf. I remembered with a sudden thrill of hope that his skill in tracking surpassed almost that of the primitive Gonds. In an instant he had hit the trail.

"Here a man waited barefoot," he muttered. "Here to him came Prithvi Raj's polo boots. Barefoot salaamed to the Prince. They spoke for a while. Here they started off together. Who-oop, old Jumbo, a screaming scent!"

At a steady jog-trot—so unerring was Rollie's trained eye—we followed the double trail; followed it out of the compound gates, along, for a little while, the white gleaming ribbon of the Sunara Road, where even I could see the imprints in the dust; and off, at a sudden right angle, into the boulder-strewn, scrub-studded obscurity of the jungle. My nerves were thrilling now with indescribable excitement. As Rollie jogged unfalteringly on, eyes glued to the ground, through the spectral immensity of the night, whose silence was shattered by the ghoulish howling of jackals and the stealthy slinking of wild things in the scrub around us, all my fear went from me. I felt now—such was my confidence in Rollie—that we were going to save my friend. I even felt, with the romantic exultation of boyhood's days, that we were going to regain that treasure which would change the fortunes of a gallant people. And vainly thinking thus—



I saw, with a great throb of the heart, that the trail was leading straight to Sunara Fort.

On the crest of a ridge ahead, it stood out like a rotted old jagged fang, the ruin of that robber castle. Scattered over all the heights, they still remain, the shells of those old strongholds from which, two centuries ago, Rohilla chieftains used to terrorise the countryside; decayed now, and deserted—except for occasional picnic parties.

“The Fort, by gad,” I whispered to Rollie.

For answer he seized me by the neck and flung me down behind the shadow of a rock. His quick ear had caught a distant sound unheard by mine. I felt a tremor in the arm that held me as he pointed with the other hand towards the declivity from the Fort.

“S’sh, Jumbo,” he breathed, “look!”

And following the direction of his finger, I began to shake like a schoolgirl.

Down the track, straight towards us, a shadowy figure was tearing—at great speed, with frantic backward glances, tumbling and stumbling over the boulders, as though pursued by the devil himself—a living picture of terror incarnate. We crouched, every nerve and sinew tense-strung, ready to spring.

“Our friend Barefoot,” whispered Rollie.

And during those moments while the apparition tore down towards us, I realised with a terrible sinking of the heart, that where two had gone, only one was returning—one, alone, in a frenzied state of panic. There, in the lonely jungle, under the brow of that long dead Fort with this maniac fleeing from heaven knows what, the memory of Muldoo’s behaviour when he had recounted the fate of previous treasure-seekers, flashed with appalling vividness through my mind. Prithvi Raj, my poor friend . . . what dreadful Thing I wondered, were his eyes now beholding—what agony of the flesh had he encountered, that should send this creature rushing hell-scarred through the night?

“On to him, Jumbo!”

Rollie’s voice crisped in my ear. Grateful for the anodyne of action at last, we sprang together upon the fleeing figure. In a second the three of us rolled and

rocked in a seething heap on the ground. I am not exactly a weakling, and Rollie is, well, Rollie—yet I have never known a more desperate struggle than that one in the dark-shadowed jungle. Animated to superhuman strength by his wild and nameless terror, the creature fought like a dozen maniacs.

"Let me go," he screamed in ghastly accents, as Rollie at last got a master-grip on his arm, "oh, Sahibs, ye know not what ye do. Let me go from this accursed place. *Aie, aie, aie*, let me go, I say, let me go. . . ."

"Not yet, my friend," said Rollie grimly, as the sinewy Rajput, now helpless in his grip, drummed frantically with his heels, "where's the Prince?"

Again Barefoot gave way to dreadful paroxysms, but Rollie's stern words brought him back to some semblance of sanity.

"*Choop!*" growled Rollie, "we know the Maharanee has paid you to decoy the Prince to this so-called treasure. Only if we find the Prince alive is there any hope for *your* dirty hide. If not—" Rollie made an eloquent gesture, "I promise you shall share his fate—whatever it may be. Get up," he kicked the grovelling wretch to his feet, "lead us to the Prince."

"'Tis true I took the Maharanee's gold," moaned the half-crazed Rajput, "yet is the treasure the Prince's treasure, and if he dares to seek it—"

"That'll do—get on."

Rollie prodded the blubbering man into a run with his pistol barrel. Occasional glimpses of our captive's face when the brilliant starlight fell upon it were not exactly stimulating to the *morale*, and I was, I confess, bathed in a cold sweat of funk by the time we gained the jungle-grown skeleton of the Fort. As the gloom of the jagged, roofless walls closed round us, and we crashed through the two-foot thicket which now floored what had once been a banqueting hall, Rollie demanded again:

"Now then, where's the Prince?"

It took both of us this time, so convulsed was the man by his fear, to make him comply.

"For your own sakes, Sahibs," he screamed, "I beseech ye to get away—while yet ye can."

"An encouraging sort of bloke!" I muttered between chattering teeth; but the persuasion of Rollie's pistol in the small of the back forced him on: and in a moment, blubbering aloud, he was putting aside the brambles from one of the granite blocks in the west wall. For another moment he fumbled over the rough-hewn surface of the stone, and then pushed with all his weight: whereat the block creakingly revolved, displaying a flight of stone steps, descending into profound darkness.

"Down there went the Prince," he gibbered, and made a last frenzied effort to get free; but we held on like grim death.

"I see," said Rollie, "and *you* closed the block behind him. Suppose this time you go first."

"Nay, Sahib, not that, oh, not that!"

The way he flung himself on the ground, shrieking and clawing at Rollie's knees, forced a quavering question from my lips.

"What's—what's the trouble down there?"

The man only shrieked more frightfully.

"No man knows, Sahib. None has ever returned to tell."

I don't think in the ordinary way anyone would call me a funk; but the sight of that dark cavity, and the Hindu's inhuman terror of it had a shameful effect on me. My knees knocked together, and my palms went damp as dish-clouts. But Rollie drawled with his usual calmness.

"Well, if it's any consolation to you, you're going to know now."

And with that he grasped the yelling murderer by the neck and flung him bodily down the steps.

"Prop that block open with a stone, Jumbo," he ordered me quietly. "Ready? Come on, then." And putting his hands trumpet-fashion to his mouth, he shouted down the shaft:

"Prithvi Raj—Prithvi Raj!"

Only a hollow mocking echo of Rollie's cry came back to us as we slithered down the slimy steps. The flash of our torches revealed only the dank and echoing emptiness of a huge, cryptlike chamber, with a faint glimmer

of starlight through an iron-barred embrasure at the further end. Huddled on the floor, Barefoot lay moaning—feebly now, exhausted by his struggles.

“Prithvi Raj—Prithvi Raj!” shouted Rollie again—again with no response, except that ghostly echo. I would rather have met a score of living giants than that eerie emptiness.

“Dash it,” I muttered, as we dragged Barefoot along between us, examining the floor and walls, “Prithvi Raj *must* be here somewhere. He can’t have been down more than a few minutes—oh, my God! what’s that?”

Desperately I tried to spring in the air. With appalling suddenness the very floor had divided under our feet. I felt myself falling, falling. . . .

They say that in the last second, a drowning man sees the whole of his past life. That fraction of time, while we shot downward, like so many sacks of coal—down, down, down, through thick darkness, held for me the sensations of an hour. With heightened clarity of mind, I understood exactly what had happened. I understood why those previous treasure-seekers had been seen no more. We had been entrapped by the oldest and simplest of devices. We had walked straight into an *oubliette*. Still falling, I heard the divided floor, relieved of our weight, clang to again above our heads. Falling, falling, I realised that the treasure chest must have been lowered down into an under-vault, from which there could be no exit when the *oubliette* was closed—no exit except by ladders, let down while the automatic mechanism was held in suspense by men above—a secret that had perished on the field of Amalkhot. Still falling, falling, through black and endless space, I wondered what awaited us below. Should we, as in Chillon, be cut to ribbons by the weight of our fall on a frame of razor-knife-blades? Should we drown like rats in a dark and bottomless well? Should we . . . .

The question was soon settled. After about fifteen feet of dizzy, interminable horror, there was a jarring impact as we landed in a sprawling heap. Recovering from the first shock I felt that we were feet deep in bones—and my nostrils were sickened by an overpowering

stench. Struggling frantically to my feet, my hand touched something dank and cold that felt like a yard-thick, quivering cable. Rollie, already on his feet, was shouting again.

"Prithvi Raj—Prithvi Raj!"

And this time there was an answer.

"Here," came the Prince's deep voice, with a note in it of insufferable agony. "Come to me, for God's sake!"

Flashing our torches towards the voice, we saw him crouching back against a green and dripping wall, his face as tortured as that of his would-be assassin. "Thank God, you've got lights," he muttered hoarsely. "I had none—here, alone, in the darkness with it."

Hurrying to him, I now saw that it was human debris we were treading in; and I shuddered to see, on top of the pile of old, white-gleaming bones and skulls, some skeletons on which the flesh still mouldered—remains of those doomed treasure-seekers who had come here in a long and awful succession through many tens of years.

"Alone with *what?*" asked Rollie as we reached the Prince's side.

Although Prithvi Raj's courage was proverbial, he spoke in great, choking gasps.

"Dennistoun—I tell you—there's something—some huge, awful thing—moving—in—the—darkness."

Even as he uttered the words, the hair rose stiffly on my scalp. Out of the darkness came a sudden, sibilant sound, a tremendous, crescendo hissing, that filled the whole of our vault-like prison. With shaking hand I turned my torch towards it—and I believe I screamed aloud.

In the paralysing horror of that moment I sensed the terror which made Barefoot howl like a beast—which had sent a man so hideously raving that none since had dared to seek the treasure. Could it be true?—or was I in the toils of some grotesque and dreadful delirium? A few yards in front of us, on the charnel floor of our dungeon, there was writhing a monstrous Thing, waking from sleep. In the wavering light of our torches, while I cowered back against the wall, and Barefoot howled, I

saw a mountain of barred and spotted coils gathering rapidly on top of each other. I saw the sallow gleam of an endless yellow belly, a great flat head mounting higher and higher, till, in a few moments, it swayed as high as a lamp post above us. The forked tongue flickered; the baleful lidless eyes shone pale as cold, dead opals. That immense reptile, its hugeness enhanced by the surrounding gloom of the vault, seemed to my reeling senses like an apparition from the prehistoric past. I cowered, petrified by the pyramid of flowing coils, and the pale-eyed head that almost touched the roof; and, incredibly, I thought I heard Rollie utter a little chuckle of relief—heard him mutter aloud, “The Lord be praised!”

I thought—and small wonder—that the sight of that awful apparition had wrecked his reason; and when the first moment of my paralysis had passed, I completely lost my head.

“Don’t shoot, man!” yelled Rollie, as I raised my pistol—but already I was frenziedly emptying the magazine.

“*Crack! crack! crack . . .*”

As the pistol flamed out there was terrific commotion in the mountain of thick, oozy coils; a titanic whirl of black and yellow, a deafening hiss. The head drew back, seemed to balance, and then . . .

The speed of that blow was too quick for human eye to follow. I heard only the impact of the huge blunt head against human flesh; heard the bones of Barefoot crackle like matchwood; saw his crumpled, lifeless body snatched back in the ratchet of the monster’s back-set teeth; flung off onto the pile of bones—and saw the infuriated titan rearing its head to strike again.

Well, Barefoot at least had met his deserts. Prithvi Raj shrank yet closer to the wall. Which of the three of us remaining would be the next victim, I wondered dully; not that it much mattered, for my madness in wounding the brute had condemned us all to speedy death. Half-hypnotised, I watched the battering-ram of a head posing for its second blow, hoping almost that my

suspense would next be ended—when Rollie's shout in my ear suddenly galvanised me into action.

"Hold your torch steady, Jumbo."

And almost before I could grasp what was happening, Rollie had performed the supreme feat of his life—a feat so superb and so simple, and yet so ghastly, that even now it makes me sick to think of it. As he shouted, the mound of coils was lapping upward; in another instant would have come the next smashing blow—and a fraction of a second before that instant, Rollie took a flying leap—leaped straight and true, right onto that mass of twisting coils.

"Oh God!"

Prithvi Raj groaned and hid his eyes.

Sick and terrified though I was, I forced myself to keep the light rock-steady. I realised now Rollie's desperate resolve. To his cool brain the Thing was just a snake. The only certain way of killing a snake is to break its vertebrae. It was hopeless, even from a few feet away, in that light, to try and shoot the undulating monster in the spine. Rollie intended not only to stop it striking again, but to give it the *coup-de-grace*—point blank. But splendid though the notion was, I feared if it were humanly possible, even for Rollie—so swift and powerful were the reptile's movements. For a fleeting, terrible instant I had a glimpse of Rollie upright on that seething pile of brown and yellow cable—and then he disappeared, utterly disappeared. With a crackling swirl among the bones on the floor, the living column had melted away, and, quicker than thought, reformed again, lapping like black and yellow lightning around his body. In less than an instant I knew that Rollie's bones would be crushed to pulp, and I strove with both hands to keep the torch from wavering: but in that one, fearful instant, before the irresistible power of that living band could be exerted, Rollie's pistol—muzzle pressed deep into the flesh alongside the spine—cracked in quick succession, once, twice, thrice. . . .

"Splendid!" I yelled, scarce able to believe my eyes—"bravo, oh, bravo, Rollie!"

For the effect had been instantaneous. I had a

tumultuous impression of two great mottled hawser-ends, jerking and threshing—flaying around the floor so that the bones flew rattling like shrapnel against the walls. But there was no coherence now; the power of constriction had gone, the brute's back was broken, the mighty, convulsive lashing was, I knew, its death throes. I smote Prithvi Raj hysterically on the back.

"He's saved us, Prince!" I shouted, "by Gad, he's saved us."

As the powerless coils fell from him, Rollie had sprung clear, leaping nimbly back to Prithvi Raj and me against the wall, beyond the sweep of the smashing flail. And flashing his torch over the dying monster he remarked as casually as though he'd just killed an adder:

"Not a bad specimen of rock python—eh, Jumbo? Thirty-five feet if it's an inch—and, I should say, over two hundred years old!"

But with me reaction from that nerve-shattering spectacle had set in. I was like a man roaring drunk. "Now for your treasure, Prince," I cackled. "See!" I swept my light along the opposite wall, and my voice rose light-headedly, "there it is!"

And sure enough, there it was, a great brass-bound coffer, its outline blurred by the accumulated silt of ages. But it was Prithvi Raj who recalled me to our situation—that hopeless situation which the miracle of Rollie's daring had momentarily driven from my mind.

"My poor Jumbo," he said sadly, "what good is the treasure to us, now?" With a gesture of despair he pointed to the roof above. "The *oubliette* is fast-closed. We are trapped here, to die slowly of starvation."

The truth of these words dispelled my hysteria like a pricked bubble. The great trunk of the python was only jerking feebly now—but all Rollie's valour had been in vain. He had merely saved us from swift death for the miseries of a lingering one. In a few hours our torches would be done, and then—darkness . . . waiting, waiting for the end.

"Well," I tried to pull myself together, "every man must die sometime—one can't always have the luck, and anyway we've done our best." I turned to Rollie—old



Rollie, my friend, the finest man on earth, who had risked his life so often to save others—turned to him with a sickly grin to congratulate him on his last and greatest fight of all. But Rollie, whistling—positively whistling—was already smashing the lock off the treasure chest.

“We may as well have a look at the goods now, Prince,” he remarked cheerily; “and we’ll come with proper tackle to remove ’em in the morning.”

Poor old chap. The strain of that awful battle had after all driven him mad. The ice-cold nerve and the splendid intellect which had surmounted so many dangers had been at last capsized by the events of this dreadful night. Babbling like an infant about the treasure when we were fast in a death trap. Well, it was enough to overturn the strongest mind. And the Prince’s voice when he spoke was heavy with remorse.

“I’m sorry, Dennistoun,” he said. “It was my unspeakable folly. You did more than a man could do to save us.”

And to our amazement Rollie, turning and beholding our mournful faces, broke into a laugh—a light, gay laugh that sounded dreadful in that vault of death.

“Perhaps I did a little,” he drawled, “but”—he pointed to the tangle of huge coils on the floor—“we must give the devil his due. It was actually this old worm that saved us—bless him!”

“Saved us?” I cried, “what *are* you drivelling about?”

Whereat Rollie, patting me re-assuringly on the back, flashed his torch around the grisly relics on the floor.

“I’m afraid you don’t read your natural history, Jumbo. These avaricious gentlemen died of starvation. Look here”—he stooped and picked up a horned skull from among the litter—“pythons don’t eat men, but they do eat black buck—and black buck aren’t addicted to treasure hunting. Therefore, as the talented Sherlock would have deduced, the sarpint brought his black buck with him. Also Muldoo happened to mention that one man escaped from here. Ah, you begin to see? The python merely used this place as a furnished apartment: he must have made some sort of an entrance. And

perhaps," he laughed again, "as you seem anxious about it, we'd better find that entrance at once."

Rollie was right, of course. When I did stop to think about it, I realised that no snake—for after all the Thing was only an ordinary snake—could have existed so long, shut up in a dungeon. And yet had it not been for our torches, we too must have perished, like our numberless predecessors: for we could never have found it, that ragged gap half way up a corner of the walls, where some crumbling blocks of the masonry had fallen away.

"There we are," chuckled Rollie. "Simple as two and two make four. Give him a leg up, Prince, and let the dog see the rabbit."

"Hurrah!" I cheered hoarsely, as, standing on Rollie's shoulders I peered through the gap, and saw, at the end of a long tunneled passage, a far-away circle of starlight, as though looking wrong-ways through a telescope—a little dark-blue disc that spelled salvation. "Hurrah!" I shouted, "we've got away with it, after all. It *does* lead into the open!"

"Quite," said Rollie calmly, "into one of those caves with which the river bank is honeycombed. Probably," he went on, as I sprang down again, "it was over a hundred years ago when the wall began to crumble, and this python broke through and discovered here a convenient little hunting-box. Imagine his great body crawling down through there in the darkness, and the joy of trapped treasure-seekers when they saw those two pale eyes—and nothing else—in the gloom."

"Thanks awfully," I shuddered, "I'd rather imagine something a little less amusin'."

"And incidentally," went on Rollie, pointing to Prithvi Raj's dead betrayer, "we've put one over on Step-mama!"

But the sight of that smashed body was a thing I could not just then bear to look at. With joyous revulsion of feelings I turned to Prithvi Raj.

"And now for your treasure, Prince," I shouted.

But now that, after all which had happened, it was in his grasp at last, Prithvi Raj's enthusiasm had gone. With a sudden impulse he gripped Rollie's hand.

"But for you, Dennistoun," he said chokingly, with a gesture towards the heap of bones, "I should have joined those silent watchers. By every right the treasure is yours."

Rollie, prising up the lid of the great coffer, stopped to laugh at this ludicrous idea—laughter in which I couldn't help joining, for other people's treasures had no part in Rollie's philosophy. Nevertheless when, with a mighty heave, he wrenched up the lid and looked in, there was deep commiseration in his voice.

"Rotten luck, Prince," he said slowly—"it's a case of Mother Hubbard."

It was. The great brass coffer was bare as a bone. The treasure had been looted, who knows how long ago—probably by means of that very hole in the wall which had made the snake's entrance, and our own salvation possible.

"Also ran!" I muttered blankly.

We gazed long in pregnant silence into that emptiness for which so many men had died; and at last Rollie broke the silence with a cheery laugh.

"All the same, Prince," he said, with a last glance around the grisly dungeon, "now we've got *you* back, the near prospect of a whisky and soda in my own quarters is sweeter than all the stuff that was ever in that box."

And the curious thing is that Prithvi Raj and I were of the same opinion.

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## THE GREATEST ADVENTURE

AND so I reach the last lap in Mahdipur. It was a glum party that sat in Rollie's quarters, lugubriously assaulting his decanter. The news, as bad news will, had flown like wild-fire around the station: and the lads, instead of going as usual to the club after their games, were dropping in, in twos and threes, to our quarters, till soon there was a regular crowd of ponies and cars outside.

For Rollie was leaving Mahdipur; he had, suddenly, to sail for home the day after to-morrow. A few hours before a cable had arrived informing him that the Earl of St. Orwyn, his bachelor elder brother, had broken his neck in the finals of the Minehead polo tournament: therefore Rollie Dennistoun—that name to conjure with wherever he-men were gathered together—had ceased to be; and, the cable declared, it was imperative that the new Earl should return immediately on account of certain legalities to do with the execution of the will.

I shall never forget Rollie's face when he grasped the contents of that cable.

"Poor old Ken," he said, handing the flimsy paper to me, "poor old chap, he was a stout fellow."

I said nothing—what could one say? Though silently I cursed poor Ken St. Orwyn from the bottom of my heart for not having had the decency to preserve his neck. I too was chucking the service and going home for good: but then—as my seniors never hesitated to point out—I was just a thick-headed ass who could never hope to go higher than the command of a regiment. With old Rollie the case was different, immeasurably, tragically different. Here was he, already renowned in the holies of Whitehall and Simla, with the certainty of a dazzlingly brilliant career before him, suddenly snookered

by this stroke of fate. Too damned hard for words ! and so thought all the other fellows mournfully sipping at their glasses. And it was old Ginger Sarson of the Horse Battery who broke the silence with a hollow groan.

" I suppose," he rumbled with deep disgust, " we'll be seeing in the papers next that ' The Earl of St. Orwyn is enjoying the climate of the sunny south ! ' Oh, my God ! "

" An' talkin' hot air about turnips in the House of Lords, begob ! " lamented Pat Heffernan.

" And shootin' tame pheasants ! " snorted Tiger Wade.

" Anyway," said Chips Cunningham with a faint glimmer of resignation, " we'll come and help you do that when we're on leave."

" Poor old Rollie ! " summed up Bob Haviland dolefully, and with deep feeling; for the idea of the man who was once Rollie Dennistoun engaged in such fatuous pursuits was quite too dreadful to contemplate.

I was glad for Rollie's sake when they had gone. For the first time on record they were not a cheery crowd, those dear fellows; even Pat Heffernan's Celtic effervescence failing him on that heavy occasion. The thing was altogether too harrowing.

After the last pony had trotted down the drive we stood silently on the veranda, looking out over the palm tops across the vastness of the northern plain. Now that this lap in our lives was ending, I was more acutely sensible than ever to the mystery and the glamour of India's unfathomable immensity. Myself, I was supremely happy, so happy that it almost made me afraid : for, wonder of wonders, Glory van Tuyl, my Glory, had been persuaded into the incredible folly of becoming engaged to me. It was after that affair at Shunkamar that she had committed this amazing indiscretion : going straight home thereafter to break the glad tidings to her father, who was at that time occupying London. I gathered that the great financier did not exactly give way to transports of delight at the description of his prospective son-in-law : however he wrote out to the Governor for particulars, and His Ex., bless his old

heart! must have irredeemably perjured his immortal soul, for—to cut a long story short—Poppa van Tuyl at last consented to give us his blessing and an allowance which fairly made me dizzy, on condition that I sent in my papers at once and entered the London office of his firm. So there it was; and Glory herself had hurried out again to Mahdipur with the wonderful news that there was no further obstacle in the way of our happiness. Hubert Vernon had already been appointed to succeed me in the Bodyguard, and we were sailing together for home in ten days' time. I am quite incapable of describing the state of happiness I was in: and yet, as Rollie and I watched the dusk falling over the face of incomprehensible, hateful, lovable old India, where we had had such hearty times, there was a poignant undercurrent of sadness in my joy. Rollie was experiencing this throbbing heart-ache too, for as Bob Haviland turned at the gates to wave his whip, Rollie laid a hand on my shoulder and pointed to Orion's glittering panoply beginning to march over the saw-edge of the Gulistan Hills—and spoke with a whimsical sadness.

"Sometimes in the night, Jumbo, when you lie awake in your palace in Park Lane——"

"And when *you*," I put in, "totter out under the stars from the fug of a debate in the House——"

"When you are lolling in your diamond-studded bath, Jumbo——"

"When you are feasting in your baronial hall, my lord——"

"Shall we remember," he smiled, "the sound of the squadrons galloping behind us? What it was like to track a wounded tiger through the jungle; to ride a gallant boar over the *kadir*—and the faces of old friends around the camp fire?"

"Shall we remember," I said dolefully, "the thrill of the big manœuvre camps where all the best were gathered together. The cheery polo meetings here at Mahdipur; even the merry hell of the hot weathers; and those wonderful nights in Kashmir under the same old stars that will be looking so dimly down on us in Blighty?"

"When your sword-hand holds a pen, old soldier——"

"When your bridle-arm is swathed in ermine, St. Orwyn——"

"Shall we remember that once upon a time in Mahdipur, we used to do the things worth doing?"

"Shall I forget I once had some little part in a legend known as Rollie Dennistoun?"

"Oh Lord," laughed Rollie shortly, "we're like a couple of pie-dogs howling at the moon!" And he added in a lower voice: "But they were happy days, Jumbo, happy days."

"Happy days, old Rollie."

For a few moments I gazed in silence over the darkening landscape where we had lived and laughed and loved and wrought and fought. Ah, happy days indeed, when all one's world is young, and there is space for the play of a man's spirit among the men of his own calibre. Perhaps the happiness which had come so gloriously to me threw into a deeper pathos my regret at quitting the scene of such great times and so splendid friendships. And certainly it had made me selfish, bone selfish, for I had quite forgotten Rollie's loneliness.

"I'm glad you're leaving too, old friend," he was saying with his hand on my arm. "Your Glory's a great girl, Jumbo—great. But India's the place for the unmarried: no sort of a show for family life. Apart from the fact that I shall see more of you, I'm glad you're taking her home, Jumbo."

He turned abruptly on his heel and strode back into his own quarters. But not before the wistful expression on his face had cut me to the quick. As I have just said, love is apt to make a fellow utterly selfish, and since the arrival of that cable an hour or two before I had not bothered to work out what effect it would have on a matter of supreme importance to Rollie. Kicking myself violently in spirit, I dashed after him.

"I say, Rollie," I burst out, "you can't go home this mail—not possibly. You must wait and go with us next week."

With a smile he handed me that fateful cablegram.

"'Fraid I've got to," he said; "no way out of it—my

presence appears to be imperative. You see," he indicated the inordinate number of words, "my co-executors have gone to some expense to make that necessity plain." And he added tentatively: "It would be a bit of a hustle, of course, but I suppose Glory and you couldn't possibly manage to come along this mail instead?"

"The day after to-morrow?" I said blankly. "I'll—I'll go at once and ask her."

But it wasn't the thought of the hustle that unnerved me; it was something far worse than that: a thing which—although Rollie had told me his decision of going home by that mail at least an hour before—had only at that moment penetrated my love-intoxicated brain.

Oh Hades, I thought desperately, as I hurried in search of Glory, this was going to queer the great scheme which she and the old Governor had concocted—going to put it absolutely in the cart!

I found her arranging flowers in the hall, my Glory: and the sight of her was so wonderful that, in spite of my agitation, I stopped stock still and just stared—dumbfounded by my amazing luck.

"Say, Captain Carstairs," dropping a little curtsey, she mocked me in those faintly American accents which were so attractive, "I seem to recollect that we've met before!"

Whereat speech returned, and I burst out:—

"He's—he's going home the day after to-morrow!"

Glory nearly dropped the vase in her hand.

"No? He can't—he can't possibly. Someway you'll have to stop him."

"Stop him?" I laughed wildly. "You know what Rollie is. Once he's made up his mind, nothing short of some cast-iron duty will alter it. What the devil are we to do?"

We sat down together in the window alcove to discuss this infernal and unforeseen dilemma, agitated to the marrow lest our dear and secret plan for Rollie's happiness should miscarry after all.

"Now look at here," said Glory, trying to keep calm. "Joey's boat is timed to get in to-morrow afternoon. If Rollie goes and sails the next morning, they'll only have



one evening together—and they're both as proud and touchy as can be. Only one night, Jumbo, think of it! And if we mess the thing this time, well, I guess it's finished for ever."

"That's it," I nodded in despair; for even I, knowing both Rollie and Lady Joan, had enough intelligence to see that.

For, to hark back awhile, she was on the way out to us again—now only a few hours from Mahdipur—was Lady Joan, the Governor's niece: the one and only woman whom Rollie had ever loved, and who, nearly two years ago, had returned his love by calling him things which even a man of Rollie's bigness must find it hard to forgive.

Rollie had never spoken of her again, not even to me; for he was not given to wearing his heart on his sleeve. Yet I knew that, during the years between, she had hardly ever been out of his mind; that, in fact, some of his most reckless exploits had been prompted by that empty, aching hunger in his heart; that old Rollie, amid all the blaze of his honours and renown, was lonely—lonely, poor devil, lonely.

And then—to put things in their proper order—a few weeks ago I had seen in the paper those two most tragic lines in our language:

"The marriage arranged between Captain Ivor Jourdan and Lady Joan Douglas-Maxton will not now take place."

"So she's found the dirty little swab out at last!" I reflected, gazing at the cold print which meant so much. "She was long enough about it in all conscience!"

For a moment or two I lived again in the scene of that dreadful night when Rollie and I—thanks to Ivor Jourdan's perfidy—had been flung onto the death fires, among the cholera corpses—and when, afterwards, Rollie's very soul had been flayed out of him by the rough edge of Lady Joan's tongue by way of reward for saving her lover from the disgrace which he had so richly merited. And then, going to Rollie's room, I put the paper in his hand without a word, and stalked out again. Some hours

later, when I returned, I could see in his eyes the kind of hell he had been going through; but he never mentioned that announcement, and at last it was I who had to take the bull by the horns.

"You saw about Joey—and that tick, Ivor Jourdan?" I said hesitatingly. "You realise what it means to you, old boy?"

He did realise, of course, but he was proud—proud.

"Am I a jackal," he said, "to hunt dead men's game?"

"No," I quoted, and I thought rather neatly, "you're the tiger, old boy—and the smile is now on the face of the tiger."

Whereat we both laughed; and Rollie spoke openly to me about Joey for the first time since she had left, nearly two years before.

"Joey's one in a thousand, Jumbo. I wouldn't mind laying long odds it's young Jourdan that's let her down. Once she loves, she loves, and there's an end of it. She'd never change."

"But you great ass," I protested vehemently, "she was never really in love with Ivor Jourdan. She thought she was—at first—and was too proud to retract. That's what made her jumpy. That's why she flew at your face over that cypher business. She *knew* he was a rotter right enough, and she pitied him and made the best of it."

Rollie was clearly astonished by this excursion into feminine psychology on my part. But as a matter of fact I knew for once what I was talking about—for Glory had put me wise. She and Lady Joan had been inseparable at school; they used to stay with each other in the holidays; and, incidentally, it was because Glory was a friend of their niece that the Bellingdons had invited her out to Mahdipur. And Glory in her wisdom was certain that it was with Rollie that her school friend had really been in love all the time: which tragic fact had only made her stick the more loyally to that wastrel of a fiancé of hers. However, though Rollie was astonished at my outburst, he was not convinced; nor did he ever allude to the painful subject again.

This had happened during Glory's brief visit home to confess to her father her unfortunate attachment to me; and when a little later, she had returned to Mahdipur, and we had time to realise that others had a small share in this marvellous old earth as well as ourselves, I told her the whole story. Shamelessly breaking my oath to Rollie, I put before her, stark and bare, all the details of that ghastly episode. I told her of Jourdan's black-hearted infamy. I told her how Rollie—at the imminent risk of his commission—had saved the swine.

"Rollie would slay me," I told her, "if he knew I had breathed this, even to you—but that crawling little woodlouse of a Jourdan came to Rollie—white and shaking, saying he'd lost the Governor's cypher: and Joey came too and implored Rollie to recover it, and save her precious Ivor."

"Which he did?" said Glory softly.

"Which he did," I went on grimly; "*after* Rollie and I had been within an ace of being burnt alive—and after—now, hold tight—we'd discovered that Ivor had never lost the cypher at all, but had *sold* it, yes, by God, sold it, to a hostile country."

"Oh, Jumbo, *how* awful!"

"And that's the man," I snorted, "your dear school friend preferred to Rollie."

"But why—why," Glory spoke almost in a whisper, "didn't Rollie show the creature up?"

"For the ludicrously rotten reason, my dear, that Ivor swore he'd done it out of love for Joey. Said her people wouldn't hear of their marriage till he was clear of debt—so he adopted this beautifully simple method of raising the wind."

For a while Glory appeared to find difficulty with her speech; and when she did speak her voice was very low.

"So Rollie spared him for Joey's sake?"

I nodded furiously.

"I wonder, Jumbo," she said dreamily, "how many men are capable of so big a love?"

"Well, I call it damned idiotic quixotry," I grunted. And it was then, after I had given her a practical demonstration of the proper way to make love, that we

began to sketch out our great plan—that plan which Rollie's cable had now thrown into such jeopardy.

"The poor girl's wretched," said Glory, who had seen a good deal of her during her flying visit home, "perfectly wretched. She's been pulling that miserable Ivor out of one scrape after another for the last two years—goodness only knows what ugly things—hoping against hope to reform him; and then he suddenly solved the problem himself by bolting with a chorus girl."

"Good," I grinned. "So old Rollie was right, it *was* Ivor that let her down. Now, the question is, old thing, how are we going to get her and Rollie together again?"

Glory's great brain as usual rose instantly to the occasion.

"I know!" she cried, clapping her hands, "I'll send her a cable saying I'm in terrible trouble, begging her to come to me at once. Joey would come half across the world at a moment's notice to help a friend in trouble."

"Oh, great and splendid fib," I chuckled, "where *do* you expect to go to in the hereafter?"

"Into a very extra special paradise reserved for those who stand by their friends." She snatched up a pencil, "Come on, honey, help me to compose a piteous cable. Stop a minute, though, we must tell Lord Bellingdon."

Although this was further violating Rollie's secret, I agreed with her that it had to be done: and His Ex.'s face, when he heard the story of the Q. cypher, was far from amiable.

"This story is true, Jumbo?" he asked sternly.

"As true as I stand here, sir."

And while the old man had paced the floor, shocked to the bottom of his being that an officer of his staff, a connection, actually, of his wife, could have stooped to such depths of baseness, Glory, judging the moment opportune, broke to him the plan we had just concocted.

"Don't you think it's a fine idea, Lord Bellingdon?" she laughed, showing him the cable she had that minute written out. "Once we get them together again, time will do the rest."

The Governor pulled at his white moustache.

"Yes, by Jove," he said at length, "we owe poor

Rollie some reparation. Listen, you young people, leave this to me. I'll send Joey a cable myself, at once, saying," he broke into a hearty chuckle, "saying you're dangerously ill, my dear, and she must come immediately. She can't refuse that, eh, what?"

"Oh, you old darling."

To my discomfiture, Glory flung her arms around the Governor's august neck and gave him a resounding kiss. I fear she is no great respecter of authorities. But the old man was delighted.

"There, there," he chortled, patting her on the shoulder; "not a word of this to Rollie. We must keep it a dead secret, or, if I know anything of him, he'd probably leave the country before she arrived."

All this, as I have explained, happened about a fortnight ago. The Governor had promptly despatched the cable. Joey, who was in Cairo at the time, had replied that she was sailing at once from Suez. She was due to arrive the next afternoon; and here were Glory and I, sitting in the window seat, confounded and dismayed—faced by the totally unforeseen situation of Rollie having to leave the very day after Joey's arrival.

It really was a perfectly paralysing stroke of ill luck; and while we were wondering whether we could get the Governor to fake up some sort of urgent duty which would compel Rollie to stay on awhile, we were startled by a facetious coughing, and the old man himself passed through the hall, ostentatiously looking the other way: till Glory ran after him and pulled him by the coat tails into a chair, and, almost in tears, told him of the dreadful development.

But His. Ex. was not in the least perturbed.

"Why, bless my soul," he exclaimed at the end of Glory's breathless recital, "if Rollie can't bring it off in twelve hours, he don't deserve to win her. Dash it all, when I was a boy——"

"Hush!" laughed Glory, interrupting this gallant reminiscence, "don't corrupt Jumbo's morals, Lord Bellingdon. You must think of a way of throwing Rollie and Joey alone all to-morrow evening."

His Excellency was not long in thinking of a way.

"As a matter of fact," he confessed with a smile, "we had arranged a little informal dance, my dear, a kind of send-off to you and that young rascal Jumbo, for the night before you sailed. But I'll have it altered now to to-morrow night, as a farewell to Rollie as well—and if he can't work the oracle in those sentimental circumstances, then, as I said before, the young men of to-day——"

"Oh, Lord Bellingdon, how perfectly sweet of you."

We were both extremely touched by Their Excellencies' kindness in having thought of such a jolly send-off, and even more, for keeping it secret, as a surprise for us. I began to make gruffly grateful noises, but the busy old man had risen to go.

"I'll tell Hubert and Monkey to send out fresh invitation cards at once. No, there's no reason why you two shouldn't sail with Rollie, and I hope, his fiancée, on Saturday. India will do her best," he clapped me laughingly on the back, "to struggle through the next week without you, Jumbo. And oh, by the by," he turned to Glory with twinkling eyes, "perhaps I'd better go myself to meet Joey to-morrow, and tell her of your marvellous recovery?"

But, I confess, the next day, when the sound of two guns signalled the mail's arrival, and we watched His Ex. driving off down to the harbour, Glory and I were in a state of hectic trepidation.

"Do you think we ought to have told Rollie?" I yammered. "If he spots it's a put-up job, he's sure to dig in his toes and jib."

"My dear boy, it's too late now," said Glory tartly.

"And when Joey discovers the trick you've played on her——"

"She won't!" said my affianced, firmly setting a little jaw. "I nearly died of 'sleepy sickness.'"

"But if she does," I bleated, "she'll—she'll——"

"She'll go and drown herself if she hasn't any more noive than you!" retorted Glory irritably.

After which, conversation flagged somewhat, till, peering out from behind the curtains, we saw the car returning; watched it draw up at the steps; saw the Governor

gaily helping out his niece : that slim, dark-haired, blue-eyed little girl, who, next to Glory, was the most fascinating and adorable thing in all the world.

"Now old thing," I nudged Glory, "you've got to go and face the music. Keep a stout heart and a stiff upper lip."

"And mind, whatever you do," she whispered back, "keep Rollie out of sight till dinner time."

My job was easy enough, as we had already fixed to have a final game of racquets that afternoon : our positively last appearance in the old court where we had had so many rattling sets. Rollie wasn't playing anything like up to his usual form, but although I could generally give him a pretty good game, I was an absolute rabbit on this occasion—so occupied were my thoughts with what was going to happen that night, when at last he and Joey came face to face again.

"Shall we chuck it up, old chap?" Rollie asked after the third set, seeing my wits were wandering, and thinking, no doubt, I wanted to get back to Glory.

"No, no," I replied feverishly, "I'll lay you a gold mohur I win the next."

And so I lost that sovereign, and another, and another; but I kept the ball arolling till it was time to return and dress for dinner.

"Great work," Rollie remarked as we strolled back together, "that you two have fixed to come along with me to-morrow." And he added rather wistfully : "It would have been a bit lonely going by oneself."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him there and then that if he did go alone it would be his own damn silly fault. In fact I as near as a touch blurted out the whole show—and perhaps, as events turned out, it would have been better if I had. But remembering Glory's orders—and her orders were not lightly to be disobeyed—I just slipped my arm through his and we walked on in silence.

By the time we had assembled in the anteroom for dinner, my condition was bordering on the hysterical.

Rollie knew, of course, about the dance, thinking it had been altered because Glory and I were going earlier : thinking also, of course, that *we* didn't know about it. While we stood about waiting for Lady Bellington, and the Governor, in the best of spirits, was chaffing everybody in his genial way, I edged up to Glory whose face warned me that things were not going any too well.

" Well ? " I whispered anxiously.

" My dear," Glory arched her eyebrows whimsically, " she's in a perfect, raging fury. She got everything out of her dear silly old Uncle on the drive up from the ship. She says she's not a chattel to be disposed of by meddling relations. She says—I can't tell you what she says, Jumbo, it's not fit for young ears—but, hush ! here she comes ! "

If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget that moment when Lady Bellington and Joey came, arm in arm, into the anteroom. Joey, though flushed with anger, was lovelier than ever—lovelier even than on that memorable morning when, in a still greater fury, she had lashed out at Rollie in those terms which no small man could forget. But, after one glance at her, it was on Rollie's face that my eyes were fixed. For the first time in my life I beheld him nonplussed—utterly confounded. His jaw fell; his throat worked; he stared as though he were gazing at an apparition. And then the situation was relieved by the Governor clapping him on the back with a hearty guffaw.

" You remember my little niece, Rollie ? Of course you do. Take her in to dinner, my boy, will you ? "

Pulling himself together, Rollie bowed stiffly over her hand and murmured something unintelligible.

" How do you do, Lord St. Orwyn," responded Joey in accents about thirty degrees below zero : whereat Rollie started as if he had been stung; and I gasped hoarsely :—

" Oh, gosh, Glory, did you hear that ? Lord St. Orwyn ! Why, in the old days she used to call him Rollie, and treated him like a sort of very dear big brother."

" H'm," Glory's little jaw set, and there was a militant



glitter in her eyes. "I guess some pretty drastic steps will have to be taken before we don our slumber suits to-night."

And then dinner was announced; and as we trooped in through the great double doors, Rollie whispered furiously in my ear:—

"What the devil does this mean, Jumbo? Why wasn't I told she was coming out?"

"Don't ask damfool questions," I growled back; "feed her and cherish her like a man, and thank your lucky stars that there're wiser people than yourself about."

But as, with Glory on my arm, I passed through the portals, I deemed it judgmatic to slip a twenty rupee note into the butler's hand.

"Look to it, Jardine," I croaked, "that Major Denn—er, Lord St. Orwyn's glass is kept brimming. Do you get me?"

Jardine grinned. He was a very human sort of fellow, was old Jardine, and he guessed pretty well what was in the wind.

The Governor worked like a Trojan right through, bringing out all his ripest stories, but all the same there is no getting away from it, that dinner, our farewell dinner at Government House, was a hopeless frost. With the *hors d'œuvres*, Joey turned a pair of gleaming shoulders on Rollie and talked assiduously till the dessert to Hubert Vernon on her right; while Rollie, although Jardine was doing all that butler could do, appeared from start to finish to be engrossed in an intensive study of the menu in front of him.

"Does the man think he's doing a cross-word puzzle," I moaned.

"Oh, I could smack them both!" said Glory viciously.

And even when, after the King had been drunk, the dear old Governor got up to make a farewell speech, they both sat through all his little jokes like a couple of mutes at a wedding.

He said the sweetest things about us, did that great old man, and especially about Rollie—which, of course,

goes without saying; but when at last he raised his glass for the toast, he went and launched the most appalling floater.

"As at present arranged, ladies and gentlemen," he concluded his remarks, "you know our three young friends are sailing by to-morrow's mail. But before we drink to their Godspeed and future happiness, I would remind *one* of them (here he winked openly and prodigiously at Rollie), I would remind *one* of them of the old adage, that three's a crowd and *four* is company; ha, ha, ha! Also of another old adage, better late than never—better late than never, ha, ha, ho, ho, ho!"

"Oh, help!" I groaned amid the yells of joy that greeted this sally, "that's fairly put the lid on it."

For Joey had flushed furious crimson, and Rollie looked as if he'd swallowed a poker instead of about two quarts of the best.

However, things began to look a bit better when we got up from dinner and repaired to the ballroom, where all the brightest and choicest of Mahdipur were already assembled. Never shall I forget the huicking and hollering that greeted our appearance. Of course it was no longer the surprise that had been at first intended—except for one frabjous feature. On the Governor's telegraphic instructions the Punjab mail had brought down about an hour before from my regiment at Peshawar and Rollie's at Sialkote, all the lads who could possibly be spared from our respective regiments, so that nothing should be wanting to our farewell. Prince Prithvi Raj was there too, having come down from Las Khelas by aeroplane for the occasion, and declaring that he would bring home a polo team to beat us that summer; and as the dear lads fell on our necks and we yelled and shouted and scrummed about like a pack of schoolboys, I had a happy feeling that Rollie and Joey couldn't keep up their reserve much longer in this bonhomous atmosphere. Up struck the band into the jolliest of airs; off galloped the Governor with Joey in a kind of romping antiquated polka, and Glory cooed hopefully to me as we sailed out onto the floor.

"It's going to be all right, honey, sure."

But it wasn't, by Jove. Although everybody else was enjoying themselves hugely, I saw with a kind of sickly feeling that, as the evening wore on, Rollie and Joey were getting stiffer and stiffer, and positively loathing the whole show. They jolly well *had* to dance together most of the time—we'd seen to that. His Ex. had forbidden any of his staff to ask her for a dance on pain of excommunication from supper; and Hubert and Monkey and the other A.D.C.'s were passing the word round among the grinning lads. But all the same, as time passed and passed, Glory and I got pretty well frantic—and so did His Ex.

"Just look at 'em," he growled at us after the ninth dance, jerking his head to where they sat under the very brightest candelabra. "They're like a couple of icicles on Everest. Damme, when I was Rollie's age——"

He strode off muttering in his moustache; and as Glory and I passed behind their seats we heard Rollie asking her in politely conversational tones if it had been hot in the Red Sea. Oh, help!

And so it went on. They took no part in the hilarity which was growing noisier every minute; they sat wretchedly about in the lightest places; they looked vacantly out into the scented shadow of the grounds, as though they had never heard of a God-made place called Eden. Rollie, the greatest, boldest man that ever breathed, had become even as a corpse frozen up into a block of ice.

Next time we happened to pass near them, he was explaining to her in a weary voice the difference between a flying-fox and the homely bat. I stuck this sort of thing for another hour, and then I could bear it no longer. I drew Glory aside and gave vent to my despair.

"Star of my soul," I said, "it's now nearly twelve o'clock. In a little while the dance will be over. Rollie won't see her again, because we sail at eight-thirty; and at this minute he's solemnly telling her the Orakzai wear their whiskers long, whereas the Zakka Khel wear 'em short. Why, damme, when I was Rollie's age . . . but the thing, my turtle dove, has gone past the wit of man. It's a woman's job now, and *you must* do something—and pretty quick at that."

Resolution glinted in Glory's eyes.

"The pride-struck donkeys!" she stamped her little foot. "I've no patience with them." Then slipping her hand through my arm. "All right, I guess I'll take the matter in hand. First, we will go into supper, Jumbo."

"A very sage suggestion, my sweetheart."

And Glory did take the matter in hand—with a vengeance. When we had anchored at a secluded table, and I was stretching forth my hand toward the *pâte en aspic*, she brutally arrested the gesture.

"Drop it!" she commanded, "you're under *my* orders now. If you love Rollie, you will do exactly what I tell you."

"*Insha'allah*," I murmured obediently: whereat she signalled Jardine to her side and requested him to bring with speed a large bottle of champagne: and this speedily forthcoming, she filled my glass to the brim.

"Drink it," she ordered. "No heel taps."

"Light of my eyes, it is a pleasure to obey your behests," I chuckled, envisaging matrimony as even a sweeter thing than I had dared to dream.

"In principle," pronounced Glory, filling my glass as fast as I could empty it, "I am a Prohibitionist——"

"Good," I said, draining the fifth glass.

"But sometimes," she laughed, "abstract principles must be sacrificed to practical exigencies."

"Ah, my own heart's own," I said proudly, with a mental side-glance to the future, "that's a fine sentiment, finely expressed. Theory is but a foil to set off the sweet uses of practice: practice is a brilliant in the austere halo of theory. How about another bottle?"

Glory examined me critically, and then commanded another, a small one. When this too had gone the way of the world, she wanted to know very particularly how I was feeling. But that was a thing beyond the power of words—my words, at any rate—to express. The air was now full of purple, triumphant music, and Glory looked more glorious than several angels.

"Loveliest," I told her, "I'm feeling like twenty men—heroes all. I tell you, I'm feeling the very what's-it's-name of what's-it's-name."

"Splendid," she cooed. "Now get up : steady ! hold tight to my arm."

Maybe I was singing a little when she piloted me to a sofa in the ballroom; but it was the basest of misrepresentations to suggest—and I told her so—that I was hic-coughing. Anyway I was all on the spot when she got down to brass tacks.

"I never believed them, Jumbo dear," her voice dripped like honey amid that purple music, "when they said you were the stupidest man in India."

"Dear heart ! " I murmured gratefully.

"No; I've always thought you have a kind of brute instinct that is sometimes more effective than mere brains. And now's the time to let that instinct loose. Look ! " she pointed across the room to a couple standing like tailors' dummies against the wall; "there's Rollie and Joey. You recollect, honey, we're kind of anxious to get them fixed up to-night? Now take them and knock their silly heads together—quick, before the medicine dies out of you."

Of course I recollected, by Jove—and the recollection of it struck me cold sober again. All my senses were sharpened and refined. I saw all things now in a kind of exalted vision. I understood that after all I was a greater man, a far, far greater man than poor old Rollie. True, in the past he had done little feats of derring-do—feats which I was not just now over-keen to contemplate, lest my brow become bedewed and clammy. But what were they? What were they? In the dark, wild enterprise of matrimony, I had prevailed. I had dashed in. I had conquered. I had captured the world's most wonderful bride—while on that awful brink, old Rollie—the man whom I had deigned to worship—stood pale and shattered, not daring where I had so superbly dared ! Poor, poor old Rollie. Feet of clay after all. Well, well, it behoves a man to help a weaker comrade.

"Go on, old thing," urged Glory in my ear, "get a move on."

"Lodestar of my life, just give the self-starter a push, and the deed's as good as did."

I helped her to her feet, she pointed me in the right direction, and I made for 'em as straight as a die.

I was not going to stand for any nonsense.

"Now then, you young things," I shouted, linking my arms in theirs and frog-marching them out into the grounds, "just you come along with farver. What do you suppose God made the night for, and the darkness thereof, eh?—that you keep skulking in the limelight and such-like vomps and panities of the other gentleman?"

Thinking foolishly that perhaps I was not quite sober, they came like lambs—to avoid a scene; and when I got them in the harbour, by gad, I fairly let them have it. I never knew before I had such a superlative gift of eloquence.

"Now listen to me," I rebuked them, "nothing is so prideful as sin—I mean so shinfal as——"

"—a skinfal!" giggled Joey, with the first glint of gaiety she had showed that night. But I turned on her like a tiger.

"Decorum, please," I said with supreme dignity. "Seeing as I'm under oath to Rollie, I am not at liberty to divulge to you that Ivor Jourdan was the mangiest earwig ever unshot. I may not tell you that he *would* have been shot if Rollie hadn't saved him that time you cursed Rollie like fifty pickpockets. But this I may and will tell you—that ever since then poor old Rollie has been three parts potty over you. He's tried to get himself killed a hundred times because of you. He's averted *émeutes*, he's shackled maniacs, killed snakes, stopped bombs, captured forts—God only knows what he hasn't done. And therefurtherto, he sleeps with your photo—shut up, Rollie! you know damned well you do—under his pillow, and keeps one of your old gloves in his——"

As Rollie was getting unmannerly I now gave him a turn.

"As for Lady Joey," I said to him, "if Glory hadn't made me swear on my soul that I wouldn't, I'm in a position to tell you that she never really cared two hoots for Ivor Jourdan. She only stuck to him, like the little sportsman that she is, because he was a slug-spined spunkless blight of a lop-eared leper, and she hoped to

make a human of him. And all the time she *really* cared—decorum, *please*, Lady Joey, Glory told me you told her yourself: oh, yes, it's no good blushing, you know jolly well you did!—and s'welp me, Rollie, that's the solemn truth."

Seeing that the ice block in which they'd gone and got themselves embedded was melting with a rush now, I took a deep breath and started in again.

"Rollie, my lad, you're not fit to touch the hem of her skirt. If you're a man at all—which I begin to doubt—you'll go down on your knees and ask her pardon for the way you've treated her to-night. And you, my dear," I swung round on Joey, "you're not fit to warm his slippers at the fire. He may be a bit of a funk in the big thing, but after all, men are scarce these days, and —,"

"Oh, Jumbo, you priceless old ass!" Rollie sobbed; but though the ice was melting I wasn't for taking any risks; and I spoke to him with unrelenting sternness.

"Don't stand there a mile off," I cried, "get to grips, man. Good Lord, you've been to the movies, haven't you? Use a bit of Sheik-stuff. Kiss her, man, kiss her—look here, this is how it's done!"

In my determination to clinch the matter, I was about to embrace Joey with some vim, but the last particle of ice had thawed now, and they were both hysterical—as a re-action, no doubt, from the strain of their previous idiotic attitude, the absurdity of which I had exposed with such force and eloquence.

"Thanks, old boy," spluttered Rollie, pushing me aside, "I—I think I can manage now!"

But Joey, fairly shaking, had already flung her arms around my neck and bestowed a sisterly kiss.

"You're quite right, Jumbo, dear," she gurgled helplessly, "we've been like a pair of silly peevish children. Now run away, 'cos if Rollie doesn't propose to me within two minutes, I'm going to propose to him."

Tired and thirsty though I was, I did even time across the lawn.

"Who-oop! worry, worry, worry!!" I hollered, dash-

ing into the ballroom. "It's all O.K.—they've done it, by gosh—they've done it!"

In an instant the place was pandemonium. Everybody came crowding in from the *kala-jagahs*, and the grounds and the supper room, the old Governor cheering himself hoarse.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, "go and fetch 'em in, Jumbo, bring 'em here at once."

"Right you are, sir."

But when I blew back into that harbour, I wasn't a bit welcome. But I wasn't standing for any nonsense. "You've seemed to prefer the ballroom all the evening," I said, "and now you've got to come and adorn it again. His Ex.'s order. Walk, march—and put a bit of *jaldi* in it."

Never shall we forget that uproar when I pushed the guilty couple through the doors. Glory and I chaff them about it still when we're staying at St. Orwyn Abbots. A mighty shout went up, and, headed by Ginger Sarson, the lads made one wild rush at Rollie.

"Up with him!" bellowed old Ginger, and in a twinkling Rollie was collared and hoisted shoulder high and carried round and round the room, while the band blared out "For he's a jolly good fellow," and the whole crowd yelled raucously, the Governor singing with the loudest.

"Just look at Joey," Glory whispered to me with a little catch in her voice; and indeed the pride in Joey's face—quite a different kind of pride this time—was wonderful to see.

I just nodded. I somehow didn't feel like speaking. The last of the bubbly had died out of me, and I was overjoyed that old Rollie had found his happiness at last. In my mind I was contrasting that time two years ago when men cut him publicly in the clubs on account of this same girl who was now gazing at him with paradise in her eyes. I knew Rollie was loathing this ovation; for he always did all he could to avoid publicity of any sort; but I was glad all the same for Joey's sake. It is good that a man should be esteemed of men, and it showed her how deeply this man of hers had, in the end, come to be appreciated by all these people whose lives he had done



so much to make more secure during his tempestuous term at Mahdipur. There was scarcely a soul in the room who—known or unknown to themselves—did not owe much to him. And most of them did know, for there was hardly an eye that was not moist. And as with a yell I was dashing into the scrum to help chair him, Ginger let out another great bellow, and before I knew what was happening, I too found myself lifted on their shoulders and carried around with Rollie. Well, this didn't worry me much, because I knew it was only a little reflected glory from being Rollie's bestest friend; but I could see my girl was pleased, so I didn't struggle over-much. And when they let us down at last, the band was playing "Auld Lang Syne," and we all joined hands around the ballroom and sang all we knew to try and smother the lumps in our throats. And after that, Lady Bellingdon, of whom I had always been scared to death, kissed the two girls, and then, to our amazement, kissed Rollie and me, amid tremendous cheering and laughter.

"Bless you, my dears," she said with the first smile I had ever seen on her face.

"Ha, ha! you bad girls!" guffawed the Governor, kissing them too, after blowing his nose with great violence. "I hereby declare I'll have no more nieces out to stay. The casualties in my staff are too heavy." And raising his voice. "Come along into the supper room all of you. We have another toast to drink."

And so I come to the end. When all our friends had departed, and the ballroom was strangely quiet again, Glory and I wandered out to have a last look at the Indian stars. The cup of our happiness was filled by the sight of Rollie's arm around a slender waist at the end of the starlit path. And yet our joy, as all perfect joy is, was tinged with the sweet sorrow of parting. In the west, Venus hung like a great serene diamond, calling us home. It had been good hunting. Ah, yes, good, good hunting. But henceforth we must follow quieter trails. Below in the dark waters of the harbour, there glimmered the lights of the ship which, in a few hours, would be bearing us westward. That lap was ended. Au'voir, old friends. Good-bye, old Mahdipur.

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